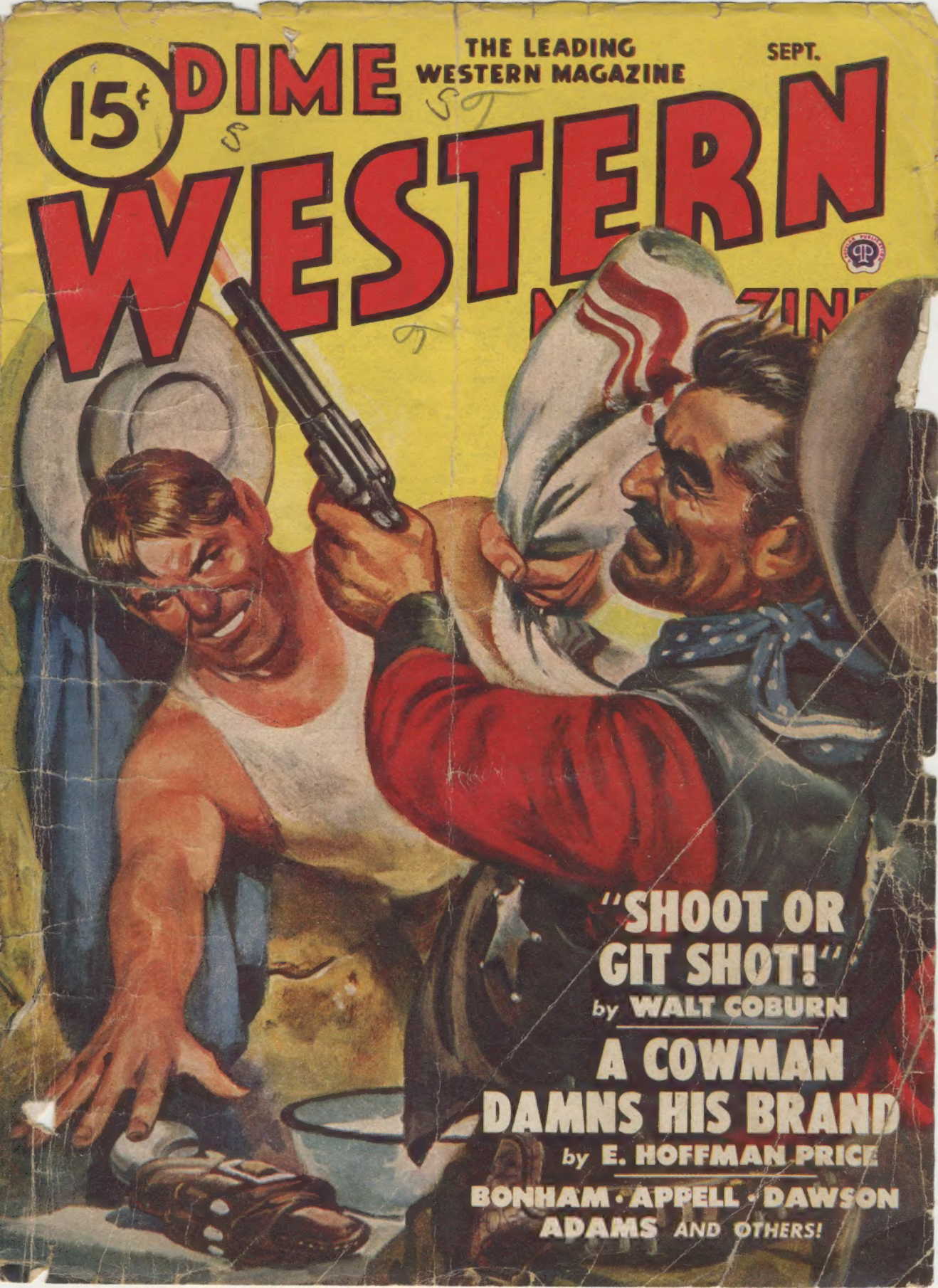
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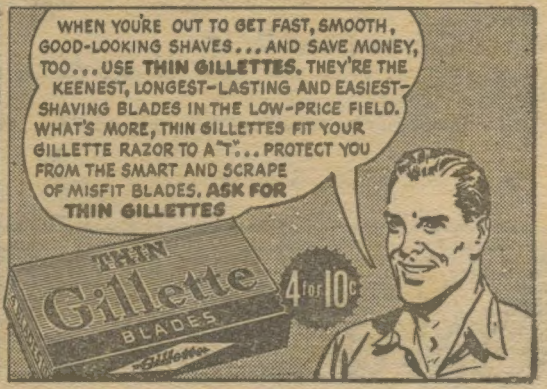
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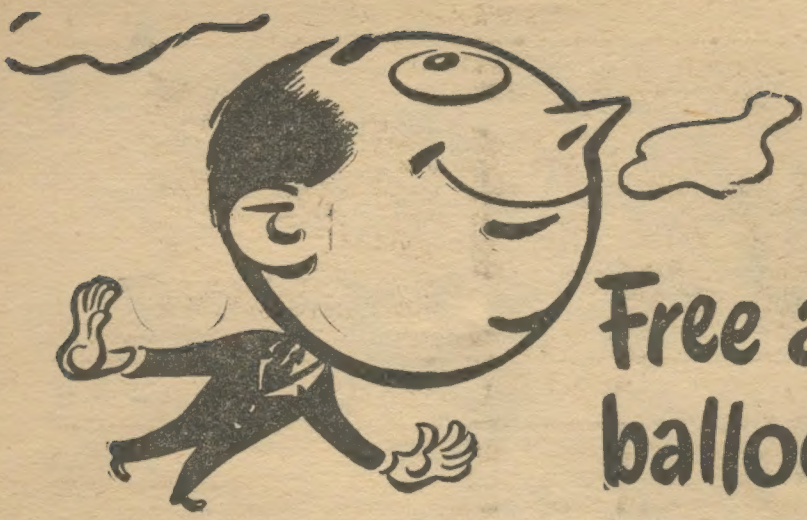

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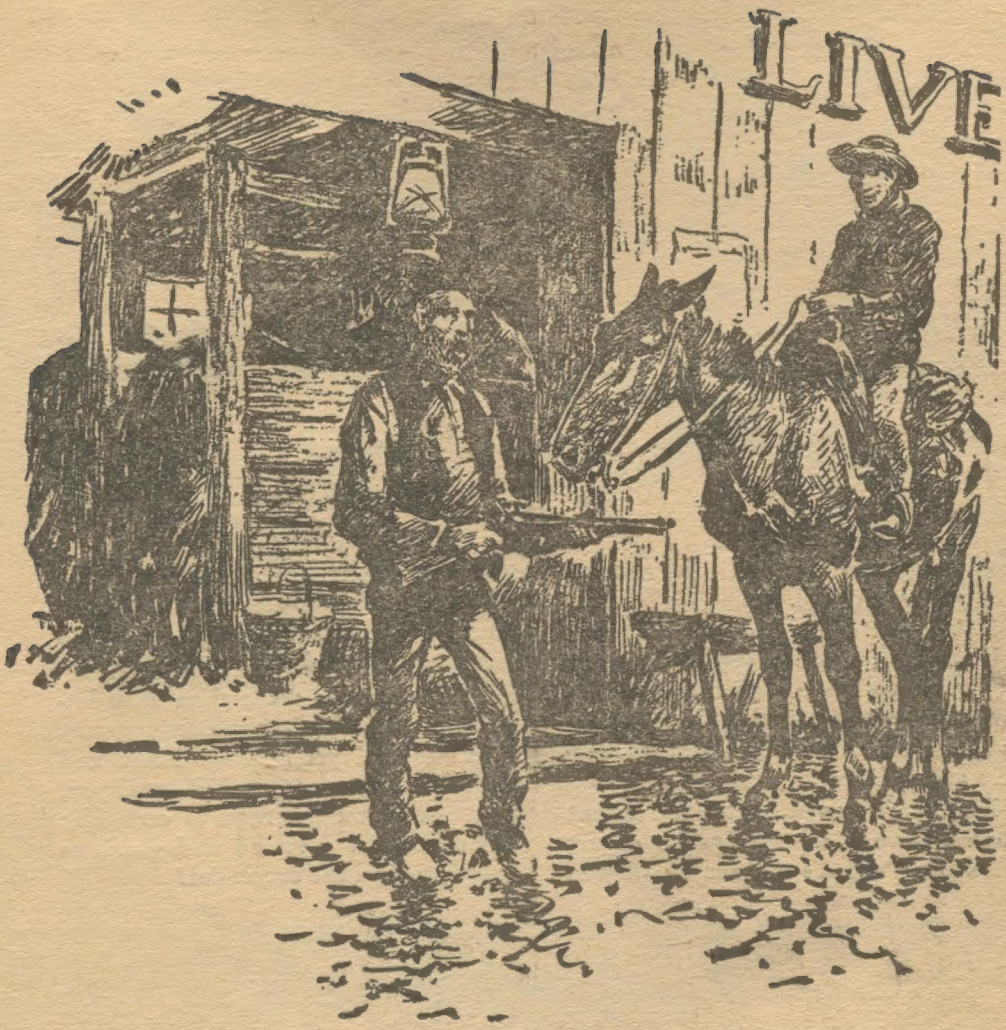

"You can't miss, Claggett!" Skelton said harshly

"SHOOT OR GIT SHOT!"

By
WALT COBURN

Their trails parted that morning in the cold New Mexican drizzle, the thin-faced kid and Sorrel Skelton, his outlaw dad... the boy to live under the protecting guns of a square-shooting kinsman, Sorrel to ride the lonely paths of the hunted. But blood calls to blood, and they met again, when the honest youngster got his last chance to hear Boothill's thundering salute beside his owlhoot father—facing together the snarling guns of relentless, merciless law....

Gripping Novel of Fighting Fathers and Sons

CHAPTER ONE

Outlaw's Son

HE KNEW his name was Warren, that his mother had died before he had her formed in memory. He had been told from time to time, when the big cowpuncher showed up, that the man was his father.

The puncher had always a growth of wiry red whiskers. His eyes were green. Sometimes they puckered at the corners and tiny sparks appeared. When he grinned Warren wasn't so scared of him.

But there were other times when the smell of booze was on his breath and blotted out the cleaner odor of tobacco, sweat and horses. At such times his voice lost its good-natured drawl and became saw-edged and Warren was afraid of this man who said he was the boy's father.

Warren figured he was six or seven when he was wakened in the night by the Mexican woman, Rosa, who told him to hurry and get into his clothes because he was going away with his papa.

Rosa acted queerly. She was scared and had unshed tears in her eyes. She was in a hurry to get the boy dressed and gone on his way. Her husband, Pablo, who had taught Warren to ride, had the

kid's horse saddled and waiting out in the night.

The big red-whiskered cowpuncher was impatient, ugly-tempered and in a hurry to be gone. He bought two quarts of tequila from Pablo and paid him from a wadded roll of bills he took from his levi overalls.

"This is for keepin' the kid," he said as he paid Rosa. "Here's yours, Pablo—for the booze. And the change of horses, and to keep your mouth shut. Lemme tell you now, hombre! You put anybody on my trail and I'll double back here and what I'll do to you will be a-plenty. Let's go, kid."

It was drizzling rain and black as pitch. It was no small pony Warren had learned to ride and now straddled. This horse was built to pack a man a long ways on a hard ride and he packed Warren's light weight at a high trot. This was brushy country where you couldn't wear a slicker. Before they'd traveled a mile the boy was soaked to the hide, and shivering, but he made no complaint. The man was forking the fresh horse he'd gotten at Pablo's. He set a hard pace and they rode in silence.

The man wore chaps and an old denim jacket. He was sodden when he picked up the boy at the Mexican's and the cold wetness bit deep. He uncorked a bottle of Pablo's tequila and drank without slacking the pace of his horse. He was corking the bottle when the thought struck him.

"Cold, button?"

"No, sir."

"Tough as a boot, eh? Just don't lie to me about somethin' else. Pablo ever give you a drink of this rotgut he makes an' peddles?"

"No, sir."

"Take a swaller. Keep you from freezin' up. We got an all-night ride."

Warren almost choked on it, but it went down and set him on fire so that he felt light-headed. After a few miles the big man asked how he felt.

"*Borracho.*" The boy spoke Spanish. He meant he felt drunk.

The man chuckled. He had the bottle uncorked again but this time did not offer the kid a drink.

"Lemme know when you git chilled and I'll feed you another snort," he said. "To keep the rain off. And learn to talk somethin' besides Mex. You've seen the last of that flea-bit Mex outfit. And don't pick up the habit of nibblin' at a likker bottle. That's the downfall of the Irish.... And I don't want to be turnin' no flip-flops in my grave. I got roped into makin' a big promise to your mother before she died. She's gone to heaven and I'm hell-bound. But I don't want her accusin' me of not doin' the best I knowed how. And when Sorrel Skelton does his best it's damn near as good as the average white man's worst. You got my Skelton blood in you, son. It'll give you all the guts you'll ever need. But it's tempered with the blood of the finest little woman God ever put on this earth. Rosa ever learn you how to say a prayer, Warren?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you remember your mother, say her name with a prayer. It'll mebby-so keep you from takin' the wrong trail. If she hadn't a-died. . . ."

Sorrel Skelton, outlaw, took a drink of tequila. He said the black devils were riding him.

THORNY brush lashed them as they rode a twisting trail through the black drizzle. Shod hoofs in the sloshing mud. And when the cold numbed Warren there would be another swallow of tequila.

Sorrel Skelton was not maudlin drunk that New Mexican winter night. But, as he put it, the black devils were riding him: regrets. Memory of his failings and his mistakes. The might-have-beens. And ahead of this man riding out his outlaw trail, was the promise of Death and that alone. But there were times when the saw-edge was gone from his voice and he told the boy about the mother he had never known.

"She was beautiful. The stars were always shining in her eyes. Her smile was a prayer of forgiveness—and I gave her too much to forgive. But there on her deathbed she held no blame in her heart. It would have been easier if she had hated me. But she couldn't hate anybody. And she left me her son to raise; to make into a man who was everything she saw in me when she ran away from home to marry me. And I gave her that promise. . . .

"Once a man takes to the outlaw trail, boy, there's no turnin' back. No slowin' up. He has to ride hard and keep ridin'.

"A man makes that kind of a promise, then he has to figger it out for himself how he's a-goin' to keep his word. Mebbyso she died a-thinkin' I'd give myself up to the law and take my punishment. She didn't know it meant hangin' me. The best I could hope for would be the rest of my life in the pen—and a man like me dies off quick in prison. He eats his heart out and dies of his own slow poison. It's better this way. Play your tough string out; die with your boots on and your gun a-smokin'. That's why I had to work it out accordin' to my own lights. . . .

"She's up yonder in heaven," Skelton said slowly. "Mebbyso by now she savvies that I've done the best I could under the circumstances. That I'm playin' out my string accordin' to my lights. You a-listenin', son?"

"Yes, sir."

"You old enough by now to savvy what I'm a-tellin' you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Reckon you kin remember what I'm a-tellin' you tonight, Warren?"

"I won't never forget." The kid spoke through gritted teeth. "As long as I live, I'll remember it."

"There ain't time to tell you much about my side of it." Sorrel Skelton laughed, a short, bitter sound.

"I'm turnin' you over to Dad Claggett," Skelton told the boy. "He's your dead mother's father. Claggett will fill in what I ain't got more'n a few hours now to tell you. He'll raise you. I'm a-payin' him all he'll ever need in the way of money to give you a schoolin' and a start in life. And there'll be enough left over for his own jug money."

So Warren found out he had a grandfather called Dad Claggett. . . .

"He had a cow outfit when I first knowed him," Skelton told the boy. "Down near Fort Sumner. I was fetchin' a trail herd outa Texas. He charged us ten cents a head to water them dogies and the remuda—and he tallied every damned longhorn! Even the sorefooted 'uns I had to leave behind there at the ranch. Ten cents a head Dad Claggett charged and I paid it to water twenty-six head I dropped there for him to put in his Claggett brand after the trail herd moved on. He was a hard man to shave, that hide-bound rascal!

"When I sold them cattle I rode back. I'd sighted his daughter Mary. Talked to her when she handed me a dipper of water. She didn't spook when I told her I was comin' back to marry her. She proved she had courage when Dad throwed down on me with a gun and told me he'd kill me if ever I come back courtin' his daughter. When I come back that night she was waitin'. We got married at Fort Sumner. There wasn't a thing Claggett could do then to head us off. If I'd had a lick of sense I'd a taken my bride back to Texas.

"But Claggett had called me some hard names. He called me a forty-a-month cowhand that got too big for his britches when I got a trailboss job and he wasn't lettin' his only daughter marry no man who didn't have his own outfit.

"Prideful. And reckless. I had the cash money I'd bin paid for that herd. Instead of takin' the money back to Texas and handin' it over to the owners of them cattle, I kept it. I bought me a outfit of my own. Sent word back to that Texas outfit that if they give me five years time I'd pay 'em back every dollar and with int'rest—and I did!

"But I had to swing a hungry loop to git the job done. Them big trail herds passin' along; whittlin' on them herds was pickin's. Then I couldn't stop. It was like a drunkard hittin' the jug. First thing I knowed I had to kill a man, then another; and I was branded for a cattle rustler and killer and I lost my outfit and went on the dodge. It broke my wife's heart and she died. . . .

"I fetched Claggett to see her at Sumner. He forgave her but he damned me. You was four years old then. I taken you an' drifted. I left you with that Mexican family to raise. Now I'm takin' you to Trail City, to Claggett. He's got a big livery and feed barn there; the White Elephant, he calls it. He might shoot me on sight when I ride up, but he'll raise you like you belonged to him."

IT WAS still drizzling at daybreak when they rode up to the big red barn with a white elephant painted on its doors. A

lantern burned inside. And out of the lantern light stepped a short, heavy-set man with a gray beard. His eyes were blue and cold. The sawed-off shotgun he gripped was pointed at Skelton.

"I already waited too long," Claggett snapped. "Step down and off to one side because I'd hate fer any of this buckshot to hit a good horse."

"There's a ten thousand dollar bounty on my hide," Skelton said from the saddle. "But I got ten times that much in this bean sack tied onto my cantle. This money I'm packin' belongs to my son Warren. I'm handin' it over to you in trust till Warren comes of legal age. I figgered on your killin' me for the bounty on me. That'll pay you for raisin' this boy of mine. I'm askin' only one favor: make a good job of it with that scattergun."

Skelton drained the last of his second bottle and threw the bottle away. Then he stepped off his horse and walked off a way and stood there, legs braced, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, a grin on his face. There was no fear in his eyes.

"You can't miss, Claggett!" Skelton said harshly.

Claggett lowered the shotgun. "Saddle yourself a horse, Skelton. And drag it. I'm chicken-hearted with that boy a-lookin' on. You was bankin' on that, I reckon, when you showed up. You hid behind your wife's petticoats till she died. Now it's a small boy you're usin' fer protection. To New Mexico you're the notorious Sorrel Skelton, the outlaw. To me you're just a big, no-good, yeller-bellied son!"

"You git no argument there!"

Dad Claggett showed Skelton a horse tied in one of the stalls and told him to saddle up and drift. "I'll take care of my daughter's son," the old-timer said. "And I'll do all that a human kin do to take all the damned Skelton outa him as he grows up."

Warren's father untied the bulging canvas sack on the back of his saddle. He tossed it into the saddle and harness room. "That belongs to Warren," he said harshly.

Warren had his horse unsaddled, watered at the trough and tied in a stall where the manger was filled with hay. He forgot he was chilled and a little sick from tequila. He stood there, a boy with rust-colored hair; freckles showed like warts on his face. His eyes were wide now with a mixture of fear and dread. Lonesomeness for Rosa and Pablo and their brood of kids. He was put aside now by the two men who hated each other. They spoke his name as if he weren't there. Neither looked at him until Skelton was saddled and ready to pull out.

"Nobody sighted me ride up," Skelton said flatly. "You kin suit yourself about how much of a head start you're givin' me before you send the law after me."

"I'd kill you, Skelton, like I'd kill a hydrophobia skunk. But you know damn' well I'd never in hell set the law on your trail."

Skelton held out his hand to Warren. "You do as Dad Claggett tells you to do, Warren. Remember about that prayer to say with your mother's name. Grow up into a man, son. Good luck. And so long."

The big man's eyes lost some of their hardness. He was taking his last look at his son. He let go the boy's hand, picked up his bridle reins and mounted.

"So long! Good luck, Papa!"

Warren's voice was unsteady. His outlaw father grinned down at him. Then he rode out of the lamplight into the cold gray drizzle and was gone.

Warren watched him ride away. The man was his father—Sorrel Skelton, outlaw. But he was something more. Warren thought him the biggest man he would ever know on earth.

"I got a good mind," Claggett said bluntly, "to change your name to Warren Claggett!"

Warren faced his grandfather, looking straight up into those hard blue eyes. "You can't change my name, sir," he said. "You can't never change me from what I am. My name is Warren Skelton."

It took a lot to make Claggett back down. The New Mexico cow-country said he was tough as a boot, iron-willed, immovable, drunk or sober. But he weakened a little now under the steady eyes of a boy.

"You're dead right, son," Claggett said after a moment. "You are Warren Skelton. Nothin' this side of hell kin change it."

THERE was a round-bellied stove in the office off the saddle and harness room. The stove was set in a wide sandbox into which Claggett, tilted back in a barroom chair, could spit tobacco juice.

Dad Claggett took Warren to the office and told him to belly up to the stove and dry out. He said so long as Warren didn't have ary dry change the next best was to dry out the duds he had on. He wrapped a laprobe around the boy and sat him in one of the barroom chairs. He tossed the bulging bean sack into the harness room where cowboys in town had left bedrolls and warsacks that held extra clothing. Dad Claggett tossed that sack, with its money, amongst the litter as if it held nothing of more value than soiled clothes. The boy wondered about that.

Claggett whittled off tobacco from a plug of natural leaf, rubbed it between horny palms and loaded a corncob pipe. He lit the pipe and pulled the cork from a wicker-covered gallon demijohn and tilted it over a thick arm and drank. A burly, hard-muscled man was Dad Claggett, a man somewhere in his fifties. There was shrewdness in the glint of his eyes when he heard the jingle of spurs outside. He warned the boy to keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut and let Dad do the talking.

"Sounds like Sheriff Luther Burkaw's spurs," Claggett said. "Luther's a bounty hunter. Out to build hisself a tough rep. He's a snake if ever one crawled."

He spoke loud enough to be heard by the six-footer who filled the doorway. Warren saw a tow-headed man with a drooping yellow mustache, splayed flat nose and gray eyes.

Burkaw's hand was on his gun. Suspicion lay in his small eyes. "What you got here, Claggett?" he snapped.

"Beats all hell what a man'll git in a swap, don't it, Sheriff?"

"Where'd the button come from? Who fetched you, kid?"

"When I was his age," Claggett sneered, "I was told to say the stork had fetched me. You got that nickel-plated badge gleam in your eye, Sheriff. You fixin' to throw the boy in jail fer a bad-man?"

"What's your name, kid?" Burkaw asked. "Who's your daddy?"

"Tell the lawman, son," Claggett ordered. "Speak up."

Warren Skelton was too young to savvy the meaning behind the questioning. But instinct made him keep his mouth shut, like Dad Claggett had told him to. He pulled the laprobe around his shoulders and looked up into those pale eyes without flinching. His face never changed expression.

The sheriff's face reddened. Then he grinned. "Come in here, Bully, and drag it outa this button."

The boy who entered had straw-colored hair and small eyes set too close together. He was about twelve, and overgrown. Bully was a good name for the sheriff's son. He took one look at Warren and came at him with both fists. Warren had never fought another boy. He was still numb from the chill of his night ride. He was knocked over backwards; Bully came on and climbed astraddle of him, fists pounding his face. Blood spurted from Warren's nose, pain stabbed his eyes. He had been taken too unawares to be scared. All he wanted now was to get out from under that big kid. Warren felt a sort of desperate panic—and red hot anger.

Skelton had wrestled and played with the Mexican kids. Now he was flat on his back as he'd been countless times in rough-and-tumble play. He squirmed, kicked and twisted. His arms flailed and somehow he got both hands in Bully's yellow hair and yanked with all his might. He scrambled from underneath without letting go his hold on Bully's hair. Bully was twice his size and weight but handicapped by clumsiness. Warren fought now with the speed that is a smaller boy's only defense. Without knowing it, Warren was putting up a young wildcat fight against an overgrown hound pup, the way Dad Claggett told it later along Whiskey Street.

Burkaw was getting the worst of it. He was bawling like a calf dragged up to the branding fire. He wanted to quit. "Lemme go! Leggo my hair! Lemme go!"

His father stepped into the saddle and harness room. He took a rawhide quirt looped around the horn of a saddle there. He slashed his son across the seat of his pants with the quirt. "Quit that bel-

lerin'," he grated. "Lick that kid or I'll quirt the hide off you!" Luther Burkaw's face was livid.

Bully gave his father one scared look—and quit bawling. He went at the smaller boy now without mercy. But Warren didn't know the rules of fighting. He didn't know when to holler quits.

"Pull that big whelp of yourn off, Luther," Claggett bawled suddenly. "Right now! If I reach for that shotgun, I'll damn well use it on you. I'll blow that tin badge plumb through your back. That's Sorrel Skelton's boy Warren. My grandson. Sorrel left the boy here fer me to raise. You won't pick up Skelton's trail till it gits colder'n McGinty's feet—because you're scared of the man. Now take your whelp and get outa my barn. Before you git run out."

CHAPTER TWO

Teachers from the Owlhoot

NOBODY on earth had ever known Dad Claggett as Warren got to know him during the years of young Skelton's boyhood and youth. In Warren's eyes, Dad was the greatest man who had ever lived. And Claggett, who had wanted a son, took the boy for his own and raised him carefully and according to his own lights.

"Sorrel Skelton," Dad told Warren many times, "has plumb disappeared—like he'd dug hisself a wolf hole and crawled in deep and pulled the hole in after him. He's bin reported dead many a time in as many different places. But Sheriff Burkaw still keeps Skelton's reward dodger tacked on the wall over his desk. He's gamblin' on Sorrel comin' back to Trail City to pay his son a visit. He'll have a gun trap laid fer Sorrel if ever he shows up here—and Skelton won't git no part of a fightin' chance fer his taw. Burkaw is a killer."

Warren got the notion that Dad knew where his father was hiding out. Perhaps somewhere in South America. Down in the Argentine, where there was vast unclaimed cattle country, many outlaws had found new range. They changed their names and quit their outlaw trail to settle down raising cattle beyond the long reach of the law. News sometimes drifted back that some outlaw was doing all right in South America. That was where Claggett figured his son-in-law was.

"I'd like fer Skelton to come back just once," Claggett said once. "After you've growed up into a man. I want to show him the man he might have bin if he'd gone straight. . . ."

Trail City was as tough a cowtown as ever flourished, getting its living from the herds that passed on the trail north out of Texas. There was not one trail, but three within a day's horseback ride. The surrounding cow-country was a No Man's Land for rustlers who preyed on the herds along the Canadian River. The Goodnight and Loving Trail crossed the Canadian near Mosquero. The Goodnight Trail cut the Canadian to the east at Dead Man's Crossing. Still farther east the Potter and Bacon Trail crossed the Canadian at Tascosa. And Trail City was within rustler reach of all three crossings.

Before Warren was sixteen he knew the brands and earmarks of each cow outfit in the Southwest; he knew how to work each brand into the rustler brands. He knew each trailboss and most of the cowhands who worked for the big Texas outfits. He'd met most of them when they stopped at Trail City to water their trail herds.

He knew the cattle rustlers by name and reputation. They stabled their horses at the White Elephant where Dad Claggett asked them no questions and told them no lies. There Warren sat, watched and listened while they sat around the stove of a cold night and the jug passed around and they swapped yarns.

"You don't need to be scared to talk in front of Warren," Dad would tell the riders. "He's Sorrel Skelton's son. A chip off the Skelton block. But his mother was a Claggett. I'm raisin' the boy accordin' to my own idees. When I'm done with Warren Skelton, he'll do to take along. But he'll never travel no outlaw trail. Neither will he ever wear a law badge. Warren will be all man. All white man."

TRAIL drovers who had known Dad from down around Fort Sumner, where he had charged big outfits ten cents a head to water, cussed him out in his office at the White Elephant barn while

they drank from his demijohn. But they grinned when they cussed him and his shrewd eyes watched them carefully. It took only one wrong word or move to chill Dad's eyes. Scratch his hide and you found a warthog.

When a herd moved north and wanted extra protection from rustlers, the trailboss rode to Trail City and made a deal with Dad Claggett—for cash on the barrel head.

"Point 'em on north," Claggett would say when they'd tilted the demijohn to seal the deal. "You're safe, that I'll guarantee. Or your money back."

"Chargin' ten cents a head, like in your old days, was chicken feed," the trailboss would gripe. "You're a damned ol' rascal, Dad."

"And you'll git no argument there. This is grazin' fees."

"Sorrel Skelton used a ketch rope an' runnin' iron and a six-shooter to back his play. You don't even leave your armchair by the stove."

"You got ary bellyachin' to do, you'll find Sheriff Luther Burkaw bellied up to the bar somewheres along Whiskey Street. He'd die happy if he could hang my hide on his law fence. Tell it to Luther. . . ."

"Sheriff Luther is a double-crossin' snake. And you know it. Luther Burkaw is crooked!"

"What about Dad Claggett?" Dad's puckered eyes would twinkle.

"You!" They would cuss Claggett out for all the names they could think up. Then they'd chuckle and drink the demijohn dry.

Dad would send Warren up Whiskey Street with the wicker-covered demijohn for a refill. And when it got late, he would send the boy home to their little adobe house where the two of them batched.

"You got your homework to do, Warren."

But Warren was learning more at the White Elephant than at school. Things he'd need to know in manhood.

"You'll be a cattleman when you come into your own, son," Dad would tell the kid. "And here's where you'll learn a lot of things you'll need to know when you've got your own iron. Hang onto the best you learn. Cut the worst into the discard. A man's got to know the crooked ways in order to travel a straight trail. Your daddy is an outlaw on the dodge. Your granddad is what you kin see an' hear for yourself. Profit by what you learn here at the White Elephant. But don't neglect them schoolbooks."

Dad Claggett rode his grandson Warren with a hackamore and on a light rein, giving him his head always. But always watching the boy, on constant alert for any bad streak to show itself. Dad seemed almost disappointed sometimes, when Warren didn't show that bad streak Dad called Skelton blood.

"You're makin' an awful liar outa me, son. If ever Sorrel Skelton shows up, I got a hell of a bait of crow meat to eat raw."

Bitterness would cloud the puckered blue eyes. He would lock himself up alone in his office and drink until the demijohn was empty. Warren would take his grandfather home and nurse him through the shakes and drunken horrors. Guard him; let no man see Dad until he left the house again, a little tipsy and clear-eyed, ready to face any man on earth.

"May the Almighty God and my daughter forgive me the wrong I done her and that wild cowboy she married and stuck to," Dad would mumble. "I done wrong, Warren. When I coulda done the right thing by 'em. And that's the one and the only thing I ever done in my life I'm ashamed of."

"You did what you figured was right, Dad. You let it worry you too much. Let's water the next few drinks till your stomach kin hold some grub."

THEY were pardners from the start. Warren came to understand why men put absolute trust in Claggett and his word. They cussed him out for a rascal, but they grinned and drank from his demijohn.

Only one man was never offered a drink from that old wicker-covered demijohn: Luther Burkaw, sheriff of the county.

Burkaw never entered the White Elephant. There was no welcome for him there. That hatred was passed down to Bully and young Warren.

The first time Warren showed up at the White Elephant with a black eye Dad made the mistake of questioning the boy

and offering help. "If Bully hung that black eye on you, son, I'll go along with you an' if you need a wagon spoke to git the job done, I'll hand it to you."

"I don't want help," Warren said slowly. "The kids would laugh me outa school if I fetched my grandpa along to do my fightin'. I'll lick Bully some day. Till then, I kin take all he hands me."

BULLY hadn't gained anything by beating up a boy half his size. Kids have their own code and it's cruel and uncompromising Getting licked by the biggest kid in school won Warren his share of friends. He had fought without fear, taken his licking without hollering quits. Bully would have tromped him to a pulp if the schoolmarm hadn't come out and put a stop to the one-sided fight.

The schoolmarm was the widow of a gambler who had been shot to death at Trail City. The town had given her the schoolmarm job so she could support her small daughter. And she had a way of handling her pupils. Her punishment for boys like Bully Burkaw was ridicule. The teacher, known to everybody as the Widow Slade, stood Bully up on the platform and made him face the rest of the school while she told them how strong and brave was this biggest boy in school, and the son of the sheriff, to boot. She had Bully bulge his muscles and stick out his chest.

"That's all, Bully," the teacher said then. "You've shown us all how strong you are and how big. Now take your seat. Put your desk up here on the platform facing the class, so that the smaller boys can look at you and see how big and brave you are. Bully Burkaw, the teacher's pet."

That did it. Bully played hookey for a week. And every day he laid for Warren and Warren was too prideful to dodge him. He took a licking every day. He was bruised and skinned up. And on the last day when Bully stepped out to stop him and beat him up again Warren pulled the derringer from his pocket. He had found the weapon in Dad's office, and swiped it. Now he had it pointed at the big towheaded Bully.

"Come on, Bully," Warren gritted, "I'm ready to kill you. Come at me." The boy's face was dead white, his freckles standing out starkly.

Bully backed away. When he rounded the corner of an adobe building he turned and ran faster than ever he had run in his life.

Warren stood there, the derringer gripped in a hand clammy with sweat. Warren didn't know the schoolmarm had witnessed the whole thing. She kept out of sight. Until Warren returned to the White Elephant to change into work clothes and help Dad with the barn chores. Then the Widow Slade walked down Whiskey Street to the adobe cabin with the sign over the door: SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

Sheriff Burkaw was reared back in his chair, his spurred boots on his desk. When he saw the woman standing in the doorway he grinned uncertainly. Burkaw had shot the teacher's husband to death.

"Your son Bully has been playing hookey from school for a week." Her voice had a cutting edge. "See to it that he's on time for school on Monday morning—or he's expelled."

She had black hair and eyes. Until grief had lined her face she had been almost beautiful. She was still the best looking woman in Trail City. The sheriff was a widower and had some idea about marrying the widow of the gambler he had killed. Luther Burkaw fancied himself a ladies' man.

"Now, looky here, Molly," Luther said. "I had to shoot Jack Slade in self-defense. I come clear at the trial. Ain't it time you dropped that grudge. Takin' it out on my kid is a sorry way—"

"Little Warren Skelton has taken it out on your son. Ask him. Quirt it out of his Bully hide. You murdered Jack Slade! It's up to you whether or not your son gets the benefit of a school education. That's all, *Sheriff* Burkaw."

Bully went back to school. His shirt hid the quirt marks that ridged his back. He left Warren alone after that.

* * *

Dad would never have gotten the story out of Warren. The Widow Slade came over to the house with a cake she had baked, and told the story to Dad.

"Warren is still carrying the derringer

in his pocket, Dad. And that isn't good!"

"He wouldn't be packin' it if he didn't figger he needed an equalizer to whittle Bully down to his size, ma'am."

"Then you're not taking the gun away from the boy?"

"Hell, no! Beggin' your pardon."

The Widow Slade's eyes crinkled. "You know what started the fight, Dad? In the first place?"

"I reckon Bully just jumped Warren."

"Warren jumped Bully—because Bully called my youngster, Helen, a tinhorn's brat."

"Well, doggone! And I figgered Warren was girl shy."

"He'd walk a mile around Helen or any other girl in pigtails. Bully is the boy who has an eye for the girls."

"Takes after his father," said Claggett.

"That's right, Dad. Luther Burkaw has the notion he's a gift to all women."

"I was thinkin'," said Claggett, "of Sorrel Skelton."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Skelton give all he had to the girl he married. When she died, his sun went down. I look for Warren to be thataway. How old is your little Helen, ma'am?"

"Five. Too young for school. But I take her with me every school day."

"Keep an eye on her. An' young Warren Skelton." The twinkle came into Claggett's blue eyes. "They'll be elopin' one of these days."

CHAPTER THREE

Bushwhacker Score

BUT when the time came when Helen Slade thought of marrying it wasn't Warren Skelton she favored. Nor would it be any run-away elopement.

"Helen has made up her mind," Molly Slade's eyes were shadowed with worry, "to marry Bully. I can't understand her, Dad."

If Dad Claggett had put on any age during the past fifteen years, it didn't show. He was crowding seventy but he was solid, healthy, and tough as he had been fifteen years before when Skelton had left Warren in his care. And it was as if he had borrowed something of the boy's youth. Warren had kept Dad Claggett young. Had made him want to live.

"I wouldn't let it worry me if I was you, Molly." Dad took the cake she had baked for him, wrapped it in a clean dishtowel and put it away in his bread box.

With his back turned to her she couldn't see the same shadow of deep worry clouding his eyes. And by the time he turned to face her he had managed a grin.

"Shore looks like that grandson of mine lost the race to Bully." He was trying to keep the bitterness from his voice.

"I just can't understand it." Molly Slade sat down in the chair Dad offered. "Since they were youngsters, Warren has always been her champion. And she'd look at him with her young heart in her eyes. He big brothered her all through school. And when Warren quit to go up the trail with the drives, she'd count the days until he got back. When he pointed his first herd north Helen was so proud of him. And I was happy for her. Because there isn't a finer young man in the country than Warren."

"Warren," said Claggett, "is somethin' to be proud of. I kin brag him up without lyin' too much."

Molly Slade was silent for a moment. Then: "But yesterday when Warren got back from his drive, Helen wasn't there. He was shaved and scrubbed and his eyes shining. When he came to the house in the evening I hated to open the door. I knew he was standing there outside that door expecting Helen to open it. And the look in his eyes, the way his grin died—it was as if he'd been stabbed.

"I lied to Warren. It was a clumsy lie. I'd gone over it in my mind a hundred times while I waited for him. I told him that Helen was sick in bed, that I'd given her something to make her sleep. Every word I spoke was slapping that young man in the face—because he knew I was lying. He knew I was covering up for her. But I finished the lie I'd rehearsed.

"His face was gray. The light went out of his eyes. He turned and walked down the path to the gate. He still had his hat in his hand. He pulled his hat down on his head and opened the gate and forgot to close it. He had on a brand new blue flannel shirt and a pair of new pants and his new boots. He had the look of a man

walking in his sleep. I haven't cried since the day of my husband's funeral. But I did when I shut the door. It was the cruelest thing I'd ever done. . . ."

DAD CLAGGETT nodded. He scowled down at the scrubbed pine board floor.

"Helen had saddled her horse and ridden away with Bully Burkaw yesterday afternoon," Molly Slade went on slowly. "She had seen Warren when he came riding back to town with half a dozen cowhands from the outfit that had been gone three months. She stood back from the window and I saw the tears in her eyes. She was biting her lips. Then she went into her bedroom and shut the door, and I heard her sobbing.

"But she was smiling when she came out half an hour later dressed in her divided skirt and boots. I saw her ride away and meet Bully. He was on horseback and had his deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his shirt. They rode off together.

"It was midnight when Helen got back. I was waiting up for her. She knew why—and she beat me to it. She broke the news quickly—as if she wanted to get it over with.

" 'Bully asked me to marry him,' she said. 'I told him I would.' And Helen would have walked past me and on into her own bedroom. But I stopped her.

"But I might as well have let her go. Better, Dad, if I had. Because it was the first time I had ever had my daughter defy me. The quarrel was bitter. She said she was marrying Bully. That Bully wanted it to be the biggest wedding Trail City had ever celebrated.

"I told her she was marrying the son of the man who had murdered her father. I told her that she was knifing Warren in the back.

"She said Bully could not be held responsible for anything his father had done. And that Warren had had his chance and never once had asked her to marry him, or said that he loved her. And how could he expect her to sit around the house three months at a stretch waiting for him to come back.

"She went into her room and shut the door. I sat down and tried to think. I heard her moving around in there. I knew she was fighting out something within herself, even as I was trying to puzzle it out. The door stayed closed until daybreak. My daughter needed me more than she had ever needed me. And I could not open that door. I was afraid to open it. I don't know why. Do you understand, Dad?"

"It wouldn't a done no good," the old man said slowly. "Yeah. I understand."

"Warren?"

"Warren showed up at the White Elephant lookin' like he'd bin gut-shot. Barrin' a nip now and then, he don't bother the booze. But he pulled the cork on my demijohn and he swallered that likker like water.

"I let him alone. I'd sighted Helen when she rode off with Bully. And I hadn't seen 'em come back. So I knowed the boy was tryin' to kill the hurt of it with likker. And I knowed it wouldn't work. But I had sense enough to let him alone. All I could hope for was he'd git dead drunk. And it'd be for the first time.

"But he might as well have bin drinkin' crick water. And he said so—with a grin that made me kinda cold inside.

"I told him it was bad to drink alone. And I taken the jug and drunk with him. Then he told me what he aimed to do—kill Bully.

"I told him we'd drink on it. And that while he was killin' Bully I'd be killin' off that big sheriff daddy of his. I told him it was in the cards. That it had bin in the cards from a long ways back. Since the night Sorrel left Warren with me."

DAD CLAGGETT stood there, his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his overalls. "Then," Claggett said flatly, "I told Warren the sign wasn't right and to keep his shirt on—or he'd lose everything I'd spent years building' up for him. That he'd be lettin' ol' Dad Claggett down if he went off half-cocked. I told him we was checkin' all bets now to Luther and Bully. That when all bets were down, me and him would rake in the big jackpot with our guns."

Claggett grinned faintly. He was looking at the Widow Slade with puckered blue eyes. "Helen is your daughter, Molly. With the same kind of courage

you've got, and what's called loyalty. You're eatin' your heart out right now when you should be bustin' with pride. Little Helen Slade is doin' the bravest thing ever a young woman could do. She's doin' it all alone."

"What—what are you trying to tell me, Dad?"

"Helen loves Warren. With all that ever a woman kin hold for love in her heart. And for the same reason she told Burkaw she'd marry him. Thinkin' she's makin' that sacrifice for the man she loves."

"I don't understand, Dad!"

"Bully knows that Helen loves only one man. That's Warren. And Bully don't no more love her than Helen loves him. Bully is takin' them orders from his old man. But he's enjoyin' it. This is once that Luther didn't have to take a quirt to his son."

"But why?"

"Luther ever want you to marry him, Molly?"

"Before Jack was cold in his grave," the woman said. "And from then on. Until I lost what good looks I had. Then he didn't seem to care. . . ."

"But he ain't forgot that you called him a murderer," Claggatt snapped. "In front of the whole town of Trail City. Luther knowed when he was licked and he give up askin' you to marry him. But he held that grudge. And now he's makin' you pay. He's hurtin' the Widow Slade through her daughter. Luther Burkaw never forgits."

Molly didn't seem to get it. "But what kind of a threat can Bully hold over Helen? If he threatened to kill Warren, Helen would laugh at him. Because she knows Warren isn't afraid of Bully. For years, since I can remember, Bully has walked wide around Warren. And Warren has walked and ridden where he pleased. Bully couldn't use that for a threat."

"No, Molly," the old man said. "It's bigger than that. It's my guess that Bully showed Helen the bench warrant he's packin'. It's got Warren's name on it—as a rustler."

"Warren isn't a rustler. He's been piloting herds north for big Texas outfits."

"That's it, ma'am. Warren takes them herds through rustler country without the loss of a steer. With mebby-so half a dozen renegade cowhands ridin' the swing an' fetchin' up the drags."

"Then how can that be called rustling, Dad?" Molly asked.

"Before Warren takes over a herd," Claggett said, "the trailboss makes a deal with me. He pays cash on the barrelhead for protection north to the delivery point—I call it grazin' fee. Sheriff Burkaw calls it by another name—rustlin'. The trail outfits pay to keep their cattle from bein' whittled on. It's bin goin' on fer years."

"So I've heard." Molly smiled.

"Sheriff Luther Burkaw," chuckled Claggett, "has bin tryin' to pin that on me fer years. He's always had a bench warrant with my name on it. But he's never had the nerve to jail me—up till now."

"But now?"

"I told Luther yesterday that I'd made my last deal with the trailbosses. That there would be no more protection money paid by the drovers."

"You're still talking in riddles," said the Widow Slade

"Yes, ma'am. I reckon it's a riddle to them that ain't in on the deal. Fact is, nobody but me and Luther know the real facts. They say a woman can't keep a secret. But I'm trustin' you with this 'un."

MOLLY SLADE smiled faintly and said nothing. And that pleased Dad Claggett. "Everybody figgers that I'm in cahoots with them rustlers along both sides of the Canadian," he said slowly. "And that's a fact. And it musta struck you and a lot of folks as bein' almighty odd why Sheriff Burkaw didn't nail me. That right, ma'am?"

Again the Widow Slade smiled, nodded and said nothing.

"I'll tell you why," Daggett continued. "And don't you tell nobody. Luther gits his cut outa every dollar paid me by them trailbosses. I'm just no more than Burkaw's hired man—his go-between. Luther keeps his badge shiny clean. He takes half the money. I pay the other half to the rustlers to leave them herds alone when they pay protection."

"Then you don't get any of that money?"

"I did once, but not any more. Not since the night Sorrel Skelton left Warren with me."

"Now you're back talking riddles, Dad," the woman said.

The old man hesitated for a moment. Then: "That boy never saw much of the man who was his father. But just the same, Warren's loyalty to Sorrel is somethin' like religion in him. I don't know what Warren would do, but you kin gamble it would be mighty deadly, if ever Sorrel got fetched back to New Mexico. And whatever Warren did, he'd be bustin' the law wide open. Tearin' down everything I've bin buildin' up for his future. Warren would use a gun. He'd have to turn outlaw to side his father. Burkaw knows that. He knows what I've got for Warren's future. He's watched me raise the boy. Watched Warren become the man his father might have bin. So when Burkaw located Sorrel, where he's livin' a decent cattleman's life under another name, Luther come to me.

"He showed me proof of what he said. And he made a dicker with me. From then on, Burkaw got his fifty-fifty cut of every dollar of protection money paid by the drovers. And I paid the balance to the rustlers. Yesterday I told Luther that he'd gotten his last dollar. But I didn't tell him nothin' more. And that's all I'm tellin' you now, ma'am. You'll have to be satisfied with that."

"Now it's a showdown," Molly said softly. "It's a showdown of some kind."

"Tomorrow," Claggett, said, "is Warren's birthday. He'll be twenty-one. Legal age. And I got his birthday present all bought and paid for and wrapped up in what you might call rawhide. He'll own all that strip of cow-country held by them so-called rustlers. He'll have plenty cattle in his own Flyin' W iron. A remuda of good horses in that same brand. He's even got his crew of cowhands. All bought and paid for. And that's what Warren gits tomorrow on his twenty-first birthday. But you keep that a secret, Molly."

"I'll keep it a secret."

"I plan it for a surprise on Warren."

"It would make a splendid wedding present, Dad." The Widow Slade looked at the grizzled old man and laughed.

"Now where'd you ever learn, Molly, how to read a man's thoughts?"

The Widow Slade was on her feet now. She walked over to where Claggett was standing. She took his whiskered face in her hands and kissed him. She said softly, "That's the first time I've kissed a man since I kissed my husband. . .on the night he got murdered by Burkaw."

To cover his confusion, Dad said that speaking of Jack Slade reminded him of something.

"That derringer. It belonged to Jack. It was the gun Burkaw never give the gamblin' man a chance to use. I taken it from Jack's vest pocket when he lay dead behind his card table where he'd won all the money Burkaw had. I kept the derringer in my desk at the White Elephant. Little Warren swiped it years ago. He said he handed it to his schoolteacher because she said it wasn't a good example for the other kids, him packin' a gun to school. You still got that derringer, Molly?"

"I had it until yesterday. When I looked in my dresser drawer for it last night, after my quarrel with Helen, it was gone. Helen must have taken it—"

"You wanted the gun?" Dad Claggett asked.

"I wanted the derringer. Yes."

"Now Helen's got it. You take it away from her, ma'am. And it'd be a good idee if you leave all the gun chores to me and Warren. You kin tell that to Helen as comin' from Dad Claggett."

They were standing near the door and she was ready to go. "When Sorrel Skelton shows up," Molly said quietly, "he might like a chunk of my cake. It's probably been a long time since he's eaten any cake."

She left Claggett standing in his doorway, a bewildered look in his eyes.

"Well I'll be damned!" Claggett chuckled, and scratched his grizzled head. "There's a woman for you. . .And me askin' her if she knowed how to keep a secret. . . ."

Dad himself didn't know Skelton was coming back to Trail City. It was no more than a hunch. A supposition based on his knowledge of the renegade's nature. . . .

THERE had been a lot of money in that bean sack Skelton had turned over to Claggett for Warren's heritage. And tomorrow, on his twenty-first birthday, that money belonged to Warren without legal strings attached—providing Dad Claggett had the money that had been in the sack. And Dad figured Skelton was just the man to show up, in spite of hell and high water and regardless of any law against him, to see that Warren got paid every dollar that belonged to him. That was Claggett's hunch, but how Molly Slade could tally it that-away was beyond Dad's reckoning. . . .

Claggett had never heard directly from Skelton during the past fifteen years. Sheriff Burkaw had told Claggett where Sorrel was hiding out. That damn' Luther kept his ear to the ground. Sorrel Skelton, furthermore, had made it easier. He'd sent back word to that bounty hunter sheriff at Trail City. Burkaw had showed Dad Claggett the message with Skelton's name signed to it.

To Sheriff Luther Burkaw at Trail City, New Mexico: You are the double-crossing cattle thief who sold out the men who trusted you. You traded in your tough rep for that law badge. And you throwed the blame of your own bushwhacking on Sorrel Skelton. Then you put a big bounty on my hide. You want to collect that bounty, Luther, I'll tell you how to locate me. I am down in Chihuahua, Mexico. Any time you feel lucky take a pasear down here and take your chances. All you got to do is kill me and fetch back my dead carcass to Trail City and collect that big bounty you had your law put on my hide. But I don't think you have got the guts to pick up my trail. You were always a yellow-bellied coward, Luther. From the time we was pardners together you never had the guts to play your tough string out. Whenever we got into a tight you would quit like a mangy yellow cur hound dog. You left me to do the fighting and take the blame for your cattle rustling and your bushwhacking murders. Then you made a dicker for that law badge. You hid behind your sheriff's badge to work at your old cattle rustling trade and to kill off your personal enemies. Shine up that law badge, Luther, and come on down across the Mexican border to my ranch here in Chihuahua. Mebbyso that tin star makes you bullet proof. Quien sabe? There's five thousand dollars bounty on my hide. Come and collect it, Mister Sheriff Luther Burkaw. . . .Your one time pardner in the cattle business. Sorrel Skelton.

That was the letter Skelton sent back from Mexico. That was the letter Burkaw had showed Claggett.

"I got a notion to go after Skelton," Burkaw had said. "But I got another notion beats that all to hell. I kin make better than five thousand bucks by sittin' tight and bleedin' you white, Claggett. And one of these days Skelton will show up here. When he does, I'll kill him. Now let's me'n you git together on this deal I got in mind. . . ."

So Dad Claggett stood in his doorway and watched the Widow Slade out of sight. He forgot that he made a perfect target for a bushwhacker shot. Until out of the corner of his eye he caught a slight movement in the night. He jumped back—but the fraction of a second late. A gun spat fire from the shadows. Dad Claggett lurched, stumbled and went down. He lay there without moving, blood staining his gray hair.

CHAPTER FOUR

Battle of Last Chance Saloon

OVER at the White Elephant barn Warren Skelton pinched out the butt of his cigarette and flipped it into the stove's sand box. He hitched up his sagging cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter and yanked his hat down at a jack-deuce angle on his head. He stood there a moment, a lopsided grin on his lean face. His eyes were hard. Then he left the barn and headed up whiskey Street.

Warren had a job to tackle now, a job he had been putting off a long time—until the sign was right. And last night when he had sighted Helen Slade and Bully Burkaw riding back to town to-

gether in the moonlight he knew that the time had come. He had corked the demijohn. He had gotten the booze all out of his system. He had waited all day, working around the barn, handling horses, swapping talk with men who showed up at the barn. And he had listened without comment when he heard the news Bully Burkaw was spreading from one saloon to the next, that he, Bully, was marrying Helen Slade. And now after supper, with the saloons doing a full swing business, was the time to tackle the job.

Warren would have liked it if Claggett came along to watch. He had waited an hour for Dad to return to the White Elephant. But Dad was still at the house. Warren had seen the Widow Slade coming with one of her cakes and he hadn't the heart to face Helen's mother who had done such a brave job of lying for her daughter. So Warren had ducked out the back door and gone to the barn. He reckoned Dad and Molly Slade were having one of their long coffee talks.

And Skelton couldn't wait any longer. He was too eager to tackle this job he had been looking forward to for so many years. And once he made up his mind Warren liked to get at it. Since he was seven years old he had been promising himself he would whip Bully with his bare hands.

Warren would still be over-matching himself. Bully stood six feet and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. Warren would tip the scales at no better than one hundred and eighty-five. But where Bully was big Skelton was fast and had the coordination of quick brain, speed and timing. And he had courage and cold nerve and control over his temper. Bully had a yellow streak. And he would be half drunk. But it would be one hell of a tough scrap, Warren Skelton told himself and his grin flattened.

He was hoping Claggett would be there to keep Sheriff Burkaw off his back. But he hadn't told Dad he was going to tackle Bully. He had a notion Dad might try to talk him out of it. Like he'd talked Warren out of the notion of killing Bully last night.

Warren walked alone up Whiskey Street until he came to the saloon where he knew Bully would be doing his drinking and bragging. The First and Last Chance Saloon. The place was owned by Luther Burkaw and run by one of his tough hired men. This was the hangout of Luther Burkaw and his son. Always the bar was lined by men who took their orders from the Burkaws.

Nobody but a man with more guts than brains would walk in there alone to tackle Bully. Skelton realized that when he stood outside for a moment and looked in over the swinging half-doors.

He was standing there when he heard the shot. It came from the direction of Claggett's adobe house beyond the White Elephant. Just one shot in the night. Then an ominous silence.

He peered into the lamplit saloon. Tobacco smoke was thick in there. Bully bulked at the end of the bar. His hat was tilted back, his beefy face flushed and his pale eyes bloodshot. He had a shot glass filled with whiskey in his hand.

There was no sign of Luther. Bully was wearing his deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his red flannel shirt. He was buying drinks for a dozen or fifteen men who had been whipped into taking orders from his father. Some were cowboys, others tinhorns who ran the card games in the back rooms.

"Here's to me'n my bride," Bully bawled. "To Burkaw and his bride Helen. Drink 'er down, boys!"

This was it. Warren shouldered through the swinging half-doors.

Bully was the first man to see Warren standing there. His flushed face turned a mottled color. He dropped his empty glass and his hand was on his pearl handled six-shooter before the glass hit the floor.

THE grin that twisted across Warren's freckled face was contemptuous. "When we was kids, Bully," Skelton's voice fell across a tense silence, "you used to beat the hell outa me. It's bin a long time since we tangled. Let's see who's the best man now—if you've got the guts to shed your gun an' come out from behind your star."

Warren unbuckled his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. In the crowd were three of the cowhands who had gone up the trail with him and War-

ren handed one of them his belt and gun.

Bully grinned and spat and unbuckled his cartridge belt and handed it with its holstered pearl-handled six-shooter to the bartender. Then he ripped off his nickel-plated badge and tossed it on the bar with his gun.

"This is for keeps, you red son!" he said.

Bully grabbed the bar bottle and threw it at Warren's head. Warren ducked and the bottle smashed against the far wall. Bully charged with the same movement of his overhand throw, charged with lowered head and both big fists swinging.

Warren sidestepped and shoved out a leg. Bully tripped and staggered, off balance. Warren came at him from one side. He ripped a hard right into Bully's belly. Bully grunted and doubled up, catching his balance. Warren landed an uppercut that jerked the big deputy's head back. He looped a vicious left into Bully's face. There was the sound of crunching bone. Blood spurted from Bully's smashed nose. And while the pain blinded him and his big arms flailed wildly, Skelton ducked and dodged the wild swings and drove his fist deep into Bully's belly. The deputy's mouth gaped open. Warren rocked the big man's head from side to side with short, savage, pounding jolts.

Both had lost their hats. Bully's towhead was sweat-matted and his face blood-smeared as he tried to block the blows. Then he got his big back against the bar, and his legs braced. He dropped into a crouch and his arms covered his face. He shook his head to clear it. His small eyes glinted wickedly. He spat blood.

"Let up, you red son!" he panted. "I got a-plenty!"

Warren stepped back, disgusted. He dropped his guard. Bully came away from the bar with a rush. His big arms locked around the red-headed cowboy's middle. His bulk and the smashing impact of it sent Warren over backwards, Bully's crushing weight on top. Warren's backbone and ribs felt as though they were breaking. He was licked now if he didn't watch it. He got one arm free and drove his fist into that blood-smeared face. It jolted Bully's head back. Warren slid sideways and from under and broke the big deputy's hold. Hitting and kicking, Warren rolled over and onto all fours. He was getting up onto his feet when the barrel of a six-shooter chopped down across the back of his neck and sent him sprawling. He went down alongside Bully, who was winded and slobbering and spitting blood.

"There he is!" snarled Sheriff Burkaw. "Now, by the hell, see if you kin git the job done!"

Burkaw's six-shooter was in his hand. He had come in the back way, unnoticed. The men were ringed around the two

fighters. The sheriff had murder in his bloodshot eyes. His gun swung in a short flat arc to cover every man in the place. He cut one look at the three cowpunchers who had been up the trail with young Skelton. He gave his bartender and tinhorns their orders: "Cover them three cowhands! Gut shoot 'em if they horn in!"

Luther Burkaw strode over to where Bully was getting groggily to his feet. Bully felt sick enough to puke and he wanted to quit because he had taken all the punishment he could stand. He wanted whiskey to cut the bitter taste of nausea gagging his throat. He lurched towards the bar.

Luther blocked his son's way. For a moment their eyes met and held. Then Burkaw slapped him across the face. It was an open-handed slap. It sent Bully staggering backwards.

"Quit, will yuh, you big, overgrowed gutless whelp? There's your man on the floor. I downed him for yuh. Now tromp his damned guts out! Or you want me to quirt the hide off your big back?"

Warren Skelton lay sprawled where he had gone down. The blow across the back of his neck had beefed him. The barrel had chopped down below the base of his skull and it must have deadened his nerves. Because while he could hear every word, and his eyes could see everything, he could not move. It was as if he had been suddenly paralyzed from the neck down.

BULLY backed away from his father. They were the same build. The father's bulk heavier, layered with hard fat but still powerful. Years of quirting had kept the fear of his father in Bully and even if Warren Skelton came up fighting now Bully was ready to tackle him rather than take the punishment Luther would deal him for quitting.

"Damnit to hell!" Bully was getting his wind now. "I wasn't quittin'. All I was after was a slug of likker."

"Git your job done. Then likker up till you can't hold no more. Skelton come here askin' fer it. Give him what he wants. Tromp his guts out. You bin braggin' about it long enough. Nobody will pull you off. Have at it, you Bully."

"Git up, you red son!"

Bully kicked Warren in the face, then in the belly. Warren felt the nerves tingling down through his arms and legs and the numbed feeling was leaving him. He used everything he had to cover his head and roll over. He slammed against the wall and tried to get up onto his feet. Bully went to work on him.

Bully had him licked—and he knew it. He would kick Warren up onto his feet and before the groggy cowboy could get balanced or lift his arms that were leaden weights now, Bully would knock him down. Everything was a whirlpool and he felt no pain but only the thudding impact of Burkaw's heavy fists. But Warren kept on trying. Out on his feet, blood-smeared, soaked with sweat, battered and beaten and licked. But he wouldn't go down to stay. And back in his brain he knew that when he did go down for the last time Burkaw would tromp him to death.

"Stop it!"

Helen Slade's voice knifed through the other sounds. She stood just inside the swinging half-doors. A young woman in a faded red checked gingham house dress. Her black hair plaited in squaw braids. Her face drained of blood so that her skin was the color of ivory. From under almost heavy black brows her eyes were black and flinty. Gripped in her hand was a little double-barreled .44 derringer. It was pointed at the broad back of Sheriff Luther Burkaw and when he turned the gun was pointed at his belly.

"Jack Slade's gun." Helen Slade's voice was brittle. "I came here to use it on Bully. But you'll do. You murdered my father. You'll do."

Helen Slade wasn't running a bluff. She meant it. Every word of it. Luther Burkaw knew that. His face was gray. He had never stood closer to death. If he opened his mouth, he'd get it in the guts. A man don't live long with his guts torn apart by a soft-nosed .44 bullet.

Skelton summoned up the little he had left. He lurched into Bully. Bully was staring at Helen Slade and never looked at Warren. Warren stumbled into the cowpuncher who held his belt and gun. He felt the butt of his six-shooter in his sweaty hand; the feel of it helped. He

had the cartridge belt in one hand and his six-shooter in the other. He had to force each groggy step he took towards the girl who kept the derringer pointed at Luther Burkaw's belly. And then he was alongside her. A ghastly grin was on his blood-smeared, battered face.

"I'll come back," Warren Skelton croaked.

Then he was outside and Helen had hold of his arm. She helped him down the dusty length of Trail City's Whiskey Street as though she was helping a drunken man. That was how Helen Slade took Warren home to Dad Claggett's adobe house beyond the White Elephant barn.

A lamp burned inside. Then Molly Slade met them at the door. Her face was pale and drawn, her eyes shadowed.

"Somebody shot Dad!" Molly said tonelessly. "The Doc says he's dyin . . . but Dad says the Doc is the biggest liar in Trail City . . . What have they done to you, Warren?"

"I went lookin' for trouble, ma'am," he said, "and found it! But it's nothin' enough water won't wash off. I got to see Dad. . . ."

Old man Claggett lay propped up against his pillows. The skin above his gray beard was the color of worn out leather. But his eyes were as cold and hard and bright as polished steel. He had a tumbler full of whiskey and drank it down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Birth of the Flying W

"I HOPE you're in better shape," Claggett grinned faintly, "than you look. . . ."

"Who shot you, Dad?"

"Luther, I reckon," Dad said. "Sheriff Luther Burkaw. One shore brave man. But I'm goin' to make an awful liar outa Doc, here."

"I think he will, at that," the white-haired medico said. "He's got a thicker skull than a mule. He looked dead when I said he was dying. Then he opened one eye and called me the biggest liar in Trail City, and set up a holler for his jug—and a gun. He's got to take it easy. These head wounds—concussions—I've known a man to walk a hundred yards and then drop dead in his tracks."

"Doc's got a cheerful way with him." Dad Claggett felt of his bandaged head. "You patch Warren Skelton up, Doc. Me'n him has got his birthday to celebrate in a few hours. . . ."

Warren had a drink with Dad. Then he got the blood and sweat bathed off. He put on clean clothes. And while he was badly battered, and his ribs and belly felt like hell, he said he was in shape to tackle anything. He buckled on his six-shooter and said something about going over to the White Elephant. He was headed for the door when Claggett's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"You better wait, Warren—till Sorrel Skelton shows up."

Somebody was rapping on the front door. Warren slid his gun from its holster. He had the weapon in his hand when the door opened.

Sorrel Skelton stood in the doorway. Tall, rawboned. His red hair and mustache were sprinkled now with gray. But the same grin was on his face.

Sorrel's eyes saw nobody but his son. He tried to say something but no words came.

Warren broke the silence. "You're my father. You're Sorrel Skelton. I always knew that you would come back. . ."

"I had to come back. . ." Sorrel's voice was unsteady.

Their hands gripped, and Sorrel was looking at Warren's battered face.

"Come in," Dad Claggett growled, "And shut that door before you git shot in the back."

When the door was shut Sorrel saw the Widow Slade and Helen and he pulled off his hat.

"This is Molly Slade," Warren said. "And Helen Slade, her daughter. . .Sorrel Skelton, my father." There was pride in his voice.

When Sorrel Skelton had shaken hands with them, then with the doctor, he walked through the open doorway to where Claggett was propped in his bed. He stood there looking down at the gray-whiskered man. Their eyes met and held. And then Dad Claggett held out a gnarled hand.

"I bin wrong, Sorrel. I was wrong from

the start. I've been a damned old fool!"

"I was the man who done all the wrong, Dad," Sorrel said softly.

"Mebbyso we was both wrong. We kin have a drink on that, Sorrel."

"Luther Burkaw shoot you?" Sorrel filled two tumblers with whiskey and handed one to Dad Claggett.

"He shore ketched me off guard. But he won't be that lucky the next time."

"There won't be any next time."

"Warren will go along with you," Claggett said.

Sorrel shook his head. "No. You want the boy killed?"

"Warren ain't a boy now. He's a growed man. With a man's tough hand to play. It's bin in the cards that-away, Sorrel, from the night you left him in my care at the White Elephant. He's the true son of Sorrel Skelton."

"You say that," grinned Sorrel Skelton, "like you was proud about it."

"You bet I'm proud," Dad rasped. "Warren Skelton was raised accordin' to the lights of Dad Claggett. But he told me that first night that his name was Warren Skelton and nobody ner nothin' could change it. I learnt my lesson that night from a li'l' ol' soakin' wet kid. He's a better damn' man then me'n you put together."

Sorrel Skelton had closed the door behind him when he went into Claggett's room so that they were alone. They had kept their voice down. This was between Sorrel Skelton and Dad Claggett.

"You like cake, Sorrel?" the old man asked.

"Huh?"

"Molly Slade bakes the best cake you ever tasted. She said when she fetched it that Sorrel Skelton was to have a hunk of her cake. Her daughter Helen is goin' to marry Warren. I don't know if Helen kin bake a cake. But she walked into a saloon with a derringer an' taken Warren Skelton away from Sheriff Luther Burkaw an' his son. Mebbyso Helen don't need to know how to build a cake. . . ."

"A girl like that wouldn't have to bake a cake," Skelton said.

"The Widow Slade said that like as not it had bin a long time since you had tasted cake."

"Not since Warren's mother baked his last birthday cake," Red Skelton said.

"Mebby-so that's how she meant it. She's a fine woman, Sorrel. She lost her husband durin' the years you lost a wife. There's the old sayin' that time heals wounds—"

SORREL Skelton grinned. "What kind of a deal you tryin' to promote, Dad?"

"When you kill Luther Burkaw, that cleans your slate. I seen that message you sent Luther. He done the killin's you got blamed for. And there's plenty big outfits that's stole more cattle than ever you handled. I made a deal with Sheriff Burkaw not to put ary other law officer on your trail. He's bled me for many times the bounty on your hide. I made him cancel out the reward on your hide. But I told him to keep the reward dodger tacked up on the wall in his sheriff's office to remind himself that you'd come back some day. I used that money you left for Warren; bought him that outlaw strip along the Canadian. And it's stocked. And I've guaranteed the big Texas outfits that when Warren takes title to his outfit them herds kin cross it free and peaceful from then on. With you for his pardner, Warren kin make a go of it. With his father there to steady him down. .It won't do you no harm to eat cake again, Sorrel. . . ."

Dad Claggett was trying, according to his lights, to atone for the wrong he had done Sorrel Skelton.

"You're a good man, Dad," Skelton said slowly. "I always knew it. Otherwise I'd never have left Warren with you. You're the biggest man I ever knew."

"Then when you jump Luther Burkaw, shoot first and don't miss. And fetch Warren back home with you. Tell the Widow Slade you and Warren will tie into that birthday cake she built, when you git back. So long now. And good luck, son."

* * *

A CRIMSON dawn was streaking the sky. Trail City's Whiskey Street had a deserted look. Empty hitch racks. Not a man in sight. The sky was like a gray blanket.

Sorrel and Warren Skelton walked

slowly up the middle of Whiskey Street. Side by side. Alike in build, they walked with the same gait, hands on their six-shooters.

Dad Claggett had written a message and sent it by Doc to Sheriff Luther Burkaw and his son. That message was more than a challenge or a threat. It told Luther and his son to take off their law badges and to meet the Skeltons man to man with the odds even. This was showdown. Claggett had signed his name to it. Doc would spread the news that Sorrel Skelton had come back. And Trail City would back Dad Claggett to the limit. Claggett was the real boss of the town and this was the first time he had ever put his authority to a showdown test.

The Burkaws had no choice. There in the First and Last Chance Luther Burkaw's toadies were slipping out the back door and quitting. Doc had spread the news that Luther had tried to murder Claggett. Trail City would hang Luther for that—and hang Bully alongside him.

In the saloon, Burkaw ripped the badge from his vest and threw it into a big brass spittoon. Then he yanked off Bully's deputy badge and it went into the same spittoon.

Luther knew he had waited fifteen years too long before he took that bushwhacker shot at Claggett. While he thought he had the old man over the barrel, Dad was out-wolfing him. Giving his cards and spades and beating him at his own game.

Luther and Bully stood one chance now. Their horses were saddled and waiting behind the saloon, saddle pockets bulging with the money Luther had hoarded against such a showdown.

"If we walk out there in the street," Luther told his son, "and we shoot it out on even ground with Skelton and his whelp, and kill 'em both, we kin ride away from Trail City with a fast head start."

"What's to stop us from duckin' out the back door, forkin' our horses, and gittin' to hell gone?" Bully asked.

"Every man in Trail City is waitin' and watchin'," his father told him. "Every man has got a gun. If we try to coyote they'll shoot us outa our saddles. They'll hang what's left of us to the ridge log of this saloon. Drink all the rotgut you need to face Warren Skelton. Because, by the hell, you're walkin' out there with men to shoot it out with them. You're goin' out in the open if I have to prod you out there with a gun barrel."

In his heart Bully hated his father. And Luther had only contempt for his cowardly son. Both of them were cowards; hating the same cowardice in each other. Blaming each other now. But this was the showdown and they had no alternative. No choice. They each had a bottle and they drank to get rid of the chill of fear in their guts. They were drunk enough now to face the danger. It was whiskey courage. But it made them none the less dangerous as they came out through the swinging half-doors, guns in their hands.

From behind windows, and peering out over the half-doors of the saloons along Whiskey Street, the men of Trail City were watching.

The Skeltons walked up the middle of the street side by side, looking neither to right nor left. Their hands were on their guns.

The Burkaws came out of the saloon with a drunken swagger. When they were out in the middle of the street they stopped and stood on widespread legs. Their guns were cocked.

Sorrel and Warren Skelton saw them and didn't break stride. Sorrel grinned at his son. "We can't miss, Warren."

"I don't see how we kin miss, Sorrel."

On they came, neither pulling his gun.

To Luther and Bully Burkaw it seemed as if the Skeltons would never get within range. Cold sweat broke out on their bodies. Their whiskey courage was ebbing. Their nerves were raw. Bully would have cut and run even then. But his father cursed him and he stayed. Then Bully couldn't stand the waiting. He lifted his pearl-handled six-shooter and pulled the trigger.

WARREN heard the whine of the .45 slug and pulled his gun. Sorrel's gun was in his hand. The range was a little far. It called for accurate shooting and luck. Luther Burkaw's gun spat flame and the bullet zinged between Sorrel and Warren. They stopped there.

"Lift it a little," said Sorrel, "for distance."

The way his father spoke, the unhurried drawl of his voice, steadied Warren's nerves. The tautness was gone. He saw Bully as an inanimate target. He tilted his gun, threw down and squeezed the trigger. He saw Bully cringe and knew he'd shot a little high. He heard the whine of Bully's next bullet going wild. Warren crouched and thumbed back his hammer and pulled the trigger. It was a gut shot. Bully let out a scream and his left hand clawed at his belly.

Bully was badly wounded. He couldn't run away now. He had to make his stand. He quit his howling, went down onto both knees and held his six-shooter in both hands to steady it. He looked like some sinner down on his knees, but there was hate, and the desperate courage of a man who fights for his life. And he wanted to kill Warren Skelton. There was no prayer in the heart of Bully Burkaw; only hatred and murder. His gun was steady. Bully was a killer now.

Warren sensed it. And there was the same desperate hate in his aim when his bullet hit Bully in the chest. Warren stood crouched. He kept shooting at Bully's hulk. Each slug was going home and a scream was torn from Bully's throat and with it came spewing blood. Then the death rattle bubbled through the red froth and Bully pitched into the thick dust of Whiskey Street where he had swaggered his toughness for the last time.

Sorrel and Luther were swapping shot for shot. Neither man was missing and still neither of them went down, though the giant Luther was swaying drunkenly and death was glazing his eyes. He was playing his tough string out. And then his big legs were slowly buckling. His head lobbed forward and Luther was dead on his feet before his legs gave way and he went down heavily. The thick dust rose where he fell and then the dust settled slowly on the body of Luther Burkaw.

Sorrel Skelton swayed and would have fallen. But Warren dropped his empty, smoking gun and grabbed his father and held him upright and led him towards the nearest saloon.

"No. Not in there, boy. Home. . . ."

Then Doc came running out, shouting something back across his shoulder. They rigged a make-shift stretcher from a canvas bed tarp and layed Sorrel Skelton on it. Warren walked alongside, back to Dad Claggett's house. Back to where Dad, a tumbler of whiskey in his hand, waited.

Molly Slade saw them coming. She had Warren's bed ready and the door open. And she met them there. She reached down and picked up Sorrel Skelton's hand and held it in both of hers. Her eyes dark and deep. Her voice steady and quiet. "You've got to live, Sorrel. Warren needs you. . . ."

Sorrel's green eyes were squinted with pain. But there was a bright hard glint in them. And a reckless twist to his grin.

"You save me a big hunk of that birthday cake . . . And then one of these days you build us a big two-layer cake—weddin' cake—double-sized weddin' cake . . . for a double weddin'. . . . Me'n my son Warren will cut it together. . . . If you'll give me that chance. . . ."

"I'm giving you that chance." Molly bent down and kissed Sorrel.

"Move over, Dad!" grinned Sorrel. "I've come home to stay."

* * *

Sorrel lived, where any other man would have died. And there came that day when Molly built a double-sized wedding cake.

Dad Claggett handled that double-wedding like a veteran. It was the biggest wedding celebration Trail City ever held. Every big outfit that sent cattle drives up the trail sent its trailboss to rep at the wedding. Because it was more than just a wedding celebration. It meant the opening of the outlaw strip and safety for their herds.

Trail City kept calling it Dad Claggett's double wedding. And it was Dad Claggett who so named it.

It was Sorrel who capped the climax of Warren's complete happiness on that big wedding day: when he ushered in Pablo and Rosa and half a dozen grown sons and daughters and daughters' husbands. Pablo and Rosa were dressed in their best, and scrubbed. Eyes shining when they recognized Warren. Rosa's smile shining through the tears when Warren knew her and gave her a bearhug and

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GOOD SQUATTERS ARE DEAD SQUATTERS

By FRANK BONHAM

THE rifle barrel was a .44 Henry with a browned, hexagonal barrel. It had a fancy spur on the loading lever which did not particularly please Charlie Kirby, but he could saw it off. Charlie pressed a sun-darkened cheek against the stock and squinted at the hub of a wagon before the store. Then, because he knew it was not for a two-bit Panhandle cowman, laid it regretfully on the counter. "Mighty nice car-been, Ira," he said.

Murphy, the storekeeper, put it in the rack. "Last I've got," he said. "Sold the other to Pete Hannibal yesterday. It's a good caliber. It'll take revolver shells, too,

The Panhandle cattle king tagged Charlie Kirby with the brand of postage stamp rancher.... And that's what he was, and what he stayed, until he gave the only answer a man could to his pardner's taunt: "Do a few slugs change the color of your Texas blood?"

Hannibal reeled backward off the porch

you know. They jist begun makin' these."

Something in Charlie Kirby winced. All this emphasis on guns disturbed him. Yet here he was with his mind polarizing about firearms just like the rest of them. It was typical of Texans that, with the town crowded with cattlemen and cowboys in for the court meeting, most of them were figuring how they would handle things if the judge ruled against them. But not many of them had everything on the block the way Charlie Kirby had.

He ordered what he needed to get through the next month. Murphy was about to carry the stuff to the wagon when Charlie cleared his throat. "Guess I ought to mention, this is credit, Ira."

Murphy, fat, florid and blue-eyed, punched him with a thumb. "It's better than that," he said. "It's on me. No, I ain't crazy. I'd rather have forty little customers than four big ones. Go git 'em, boy!"

Charlie insisted on signing an I.O.U. He started down to Jack Ryan's Equity Saloon to get the reports on the earlier trials. All winter and into early spring the cases accumulated. Thieves and murderers languished in the stone jail; civil cases gathered dust. But in spring, the whole mass thawed, like the Canadian River. For a few weeks the circuit judge was borne on a flood of complaints and pleas.

Kirby crossed the road in the weak sunlight. Under his heels, ice crystals crunched in the mud ruts. They would all be there in the Equity Saloon waiting for him, cowboys he used to bunk with on the big Mill Iron ranch and men like himself who were trying to make a living on ranches too small to support human life.

A thought utterly foreign to his make-up entered his head. I hope I lose the damned case. Maybe he was getting old. But victory in court would only be the beginning of the real battle.

Old Bob Britten, aging autocrat of the plains, had endured his presence on land he claimed as part of the Mill Iron for three years. He had tried intimidation and finally had gone to court for an injunction. If that failed, the real fight would be on. But Charlie Kirby had lost the incentive to fight. The girl who had kept after him so long to break away from Britten and his twenty-five-dollar-a-month game had taken his enthusiasm with her when she died. They had had a year and a half together on the land Charlie filed on, and now the gallant brag he had made that neither hell nor high water could pry him loose rang in his head like a meaningless shout. He was still in the game, but his heart was out of it.

He was in this mood when he saw two men leave the Equity Saloon and start toward him. They were Britten and his lawyer, Abe Harkrider. Britten looked amused. He was a big man who had been a giant, a red-headed giant with bones like singletrees, but now he was more fat than gristle, more bluster than menace, and the red hair and ram's horn mustache were peppery.

Smiling, he took his cigar out of his mouth as Charlie stopped. He had the way of seeming to confer a favor by withholding an affront. The days were gone when he would wire a packer who wanted three thousand cattle: "What color?" But the land was still there, reaching south for the Red, north for the Big Blue, not acres but sections, and he was still Old Bob Britten, companion of the great. The last of the pioneers. And here came a terrier like Charlie Kirby to yap in his face!

THESE things were in Britten's rutted brown face. The old impulse stirred in Charlie to touch his hat and say, "Yes, sir." But he did not, and it was Bob Britten who said, with a soft chuckle like a pat on the head, "Well, hello, cowman."

Kirby would have walked past, but Britten said good-naturedly, "Let's let our lawyers do the wranglin', Charlie. Why, after today you can claim your old job and I'll be glad to have you back."

Charlie smiled too. He was a long drink of a Texan whose features the sun and wind were altering the way they altered the face of the land, scorching and creasing. He looked thirty, though he was five years younger. Worry and labor had trained him down.

"Thanks, Bob," he said. "I heard about a place lately where the chuck's better than yours, though, and the pay's nearly as good."

"Where's that?"

"The poorhouse."

"The poorhouse is where you postage stamp ranchers belong," Britten snapped. "And it's where you'll all finish, after the law runs you out or the land starves you."

"Enough postage stamps can cover a wall map," Charlie remarked. "As far as the law running me out goes, the law's what I'm counting on most. I've done my improvements and filed on it legally."

"If you'd been any shakes of a man, you'd have let me know before you filed. The land is mine. I've done my improvements on it and I've been paying my lease money."

"If you call a stone corral and a ruined spring improvements! You weren't eligible to file in the first place. The law is for men who didn't already own a couple of counties."

Britten knew he was quoting right out of the book. He talked louder. "What kind of law is it that cuts the throat of the men who came in here when the Panhandle was nothing but sagebrush and Comanches?"

"You'd laugh if I called myself a pioneer, wouldn't you?" Charlie smiled. "But in my way I'm a pioneer as much as you were. You had the Comanches to fight. I've got you, and I've got more justice on my side than you had when you ran out the Indians. It was easier to claim a half-million acres in your day, Bob, than it is to settle a tenth of that in mine."

Britten slammed down his cigar. "Damned, ten cent, beef-stealing cowmen!" he shouted. "The sun ain't set on *my* day, Kirby! It damn well sets on yours tonight!"

AT THE Equity, all the tables were full, the bar was lined two deep, and men circulated about, shaking hands with friends they had not seen since fall. Henry McGee saw Charlie and welcomed him with a shout. He was Charlie's only neighbor. He began loudly demanding space at the bar for Charlie. Everyone pounded him on the back and shook his hand. Most of the men in the place worked for one or the other of the big ranches. Twenty-five a month and a man furnished his own mount. Hired men on horseback. Always grumbling but never making the break, yet admiring anyone who went into ranching for himself.

McGee had the news on the morning trials. He was a blunt old cattleman who had made a couple of failures in East Texas. He had let Charlie talk him into settling in the Panhandle before the real pressure went on, and now it was McGee who fought the good fight, largely orally, because he sensed Charlie's lagging interest and with Charlie gone he would be right next door to the old wolf himself.

"Judge Dyer gave Jim Bob Harvey seven years. Sentenced Al Marion to hang. I asked the clerk when your case would come up. He said two o'clock."

Red Croft, Charlie's old saddle partner on the Mill Iron, crowded in to shake his hand. Croft was a lanky, broken-nosed cowboy with the skin of a sunburned baby. He was getting close to thirty and had neither wife nor bank account nor prospect of either.

Charlie said, noting the mosquito bites on Red's face, "I see he's got you on bog camp."

"And you'll stay right there," Henry

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McGee declared, "until you get out on your own like me and Charlie."

"Then you can swat mosquitoes on your own time," Charlie said.

They laughed. They looked as though if he rolled a cigarette they would be right there with a match. It made Charlie feel guilty, because if anyone made a decent offer for his place he would probably take it.

A man came in blowing on his hand. Red nudged Charlie. "Hannibal," he said. "He blows on his hands that-away because they're cold from polishing apples in the wind."

Pete Hannibal saw Kirby and put out a big, square-palmed hand. "Well, Charlie!" he said, as though Charlie were still one of his top hands. Hannibal was ramrod on the Mill Iron, a hearty, big-shouldered man with dark color in his face, and thick, muscular lips capable of mashing a vowel flat. He wore expensive boots and a gray, raw-edged Stetson, but his levis and brushpopper jacket were denim, an attempt at being democratic.

Silence drifted in. Hannibal laughed. "Hell, you don't have to shut up just because I came in. I only work for a living, myself." He could be hypocritical without even knowing it himself. He tolled Charlie over to a table, carrying a bottle of good whiskey and two glasses only. Charlie watched the sage-green eyes in the dark face and knew something was coming.

"Charlie, I got an idea you're going to stay in business."

"One way or another."

"It's liable to be the other. Old Bob told me wages will go to forty dollars if he loses the fight. You know why."

"Sure. So it will be easier for the boys to forget they ever knew me."

Hannibal filled his glass with a hand that was thick and steady. "Maybe you've got a buyer for your place," he said. "How much have you got in it?"

Charlie shook his head, and Hannibal frowned. "I'm not trying to throw the fear into you, Charlie. But the old man is loaded for bear. There's thirty of us. There's only you and old Fought-With-Travis Johnny, and he's crowding seventy. . . . I can pay five hundred down and three hundred a year for five years."

"What makes you think you'd make out better than I will?" Charlie asked quietly.

"Bob's no yearling. He's beginning to fumble. He takes out his medals and letters once in a while and gets drunk on them. He can't forget the days when he was the biggest cattleman in northwest Texas. But if he didn't have somebody to do the things he brags he's going to do, he'd be ranching on a quarter-section."

"In other words, the man I've really got to fight is you."

Hannibal shrugged. "I didn't mean it to sound that way."

"It did. But it's still not for sale."

Hannibal drank the whiskey at a gulp, put the glass down and made rings with it. "This kind of puts me in a spot."

"How's that?"

"I've been keepin' a brand. I guess you know we aren't supposed to do any mavericking except for the ranch, now. I've got about three hundred steers over in the Pedregosa pasture with my Panther Scratch brand on them. And we're taking the round-up crew in there next week. Bob's going to go straight up."

"You thought I'd scare out easier than I do, eh?"

"Maybe we can still make a deal. Like to pasture those critters for me till fall? There's a lot of fat little calves tagging around after their mammies. The calves are yours for the pasturage."

Old suspicions of Hannibal as a schemer rose. But the calf proposition appealed to him. Every cow Charlie had was one he had mavericked, some in the days when he worked on the Mill Iron and keeping a brand was permitted. The rest of them had drifted down to him from the blizzard country. But he was still undergrazed, and those calves would be worth possibly forty dollars apiece next year.

Hannibal saw he had a foot in the door. "There's no risk in it, Charlie. He don't even know the brand."

"This is on the level?" Charlie asked him.

Hannibal solemnly raised his hand.

"All right," Charlie said. "Bring them over."

WITH Henry McGee, Charlie started walking toward the courthouse. They caught up with a girl hurrying along with some parcels, a slender, dark-haired girl

in a plain dress and bonnet, which acquired some style by the way she wore them. Polly McGee was about the only thing around the McGee ranch which was not held together with baling wire. There had been times when Charlie caught himself riding toward the Frying Pan with only the flimsiest of excuses, knowing she was really what he wanted to see. But this was merely an oblique admission that he could never get over missing the wife he had lost, for in their talks he would find himself thinking, She laughs almost the way Hester did, or She's a dauncy little thing; I'll bet she and Hester could have worn each other's clothes.

They went toward the big two-story stone building. "Hannibal wanted to buy me out," Charlie told them with a chuckle. "He takes a hundred and fifty a month out of Bob Britten's jeans and still has ideas he'd like to be independent. It would serve him right if I sold to him."

Polly's eyes were gray, dark gray, like evening clouds. Talk of selling out or knuckling down was always good for an argument around the McGee ranch. "You don't suppose he was talking for himself, do you? Britten primed him."

"I doubt it. He made me another offer that Britten never cooked up. A grazing deal. I took him up on it."

"You made a deal with Hannibal? That —that cowman's butler?"

"Why not? I may even sell out to him this fall, if he still wants to buy."

Polly stopped at the foot of the steps, where the crowd stirred. "Charlie, what are we going in here for? Why did you go to all the trouble to get a lawyer to fight Britten?"

Charlie shrugged. "This fight will go on for years, even if I win today. If I beat the injunction, I can sell for a fair price and move someplace where the big outfits have already been cut down to frying size."

"Where the small cattlemen have already made their fight, you mean! And men who aren't afraid of Bob Britten can make it here!"

Charlie spoke sharply, prodded by a strong sense that he was only a wall for other men to make their brave talk behind. "Maybe you'd like to trade spots with me, Henry; you make the fight and I'll do the cheering. That's a good shake."

McGee did not anger easily. "I'm not riding you, son. Only I got the idea when you talked me into settling here that we'd all sort of hang together."

Charlie was shamed by his calm recollection of the time when he himself had been the organizer and hot head. He said, "I'm sorry. I guess you don't need to worry about my selling."

He went in alone. The courtroom was warm and smoky and crowded. Britten and some of his men sat in front, a whole mourner's bench of them. Beside the bench, Judge Dyer was conferring with Harkrider and Charlie's lawyer. They stood firing at a battered spittoon. Finally Judge Dyer took his place and rapped for order. The clerk read from a paper.

"The case of Robert M. Britten *versus* Charles Kirby."

The judge, a small, dour-visaged man, shuffled some papers on his desk, and said, hardly glancing up, "The court has duly considered and finds in favor of the defendant, Charles Kirby. . . . Next case."

It was over so fast they could hardly accept it. Even an earthquake gives a warning rumble. But Judge Dyer had calmly loaded and lighted the cannon that might tear this whole country apart. Lawyers in Kansas, in Oklahoma, in Wyoming, would build their cases on the cornerstone which had been mortared in this dusty Panhandle courtroom.

There was no cheering, just a kind of sigh that moved across the packed room like wind over headed wheat. In silence, Bob Britten and his spurred and booted courtiers left the room. Charlie departed soon after. He avoided the McGees, walking back to his wagon and driving slowly along the frosty ruts northward out of town. He tried to feel it and couldn't. It was the beginning of something long and frightening, the end of which no man could see.

THROUGH the next three weeks the Mill Iron round-up crew worked up from the south, driving the cattle in toward the heart of the ranch, near the Canadian. Charlie's place was across the river on Dry Cheyenne Creek, a huddle of buildings and corrals nestled at the foot of a rocky ridge on the flat prairie.

One night Pete Hannibal rode over, ostensibly to tell Charlie to send a rep man: There were some of his Half-Moon cattle in the last bunch to cut out and drive home.

Then he said tersely, "Tomorrow night. Where do you want them?"

"Leave them in my Spanish Spur pasture."

He did not hear the cattle arrive, but several days later he glimpsed a few ranging down toward the river. He drove them back to a lick where they would likely stay a while. Fought-With-Travis Johnny went over to pick up the Half-Moon strays.

Johnny was back in a few days, pushing a small bunch of longhorns. He came at a bow-legged walk to the small adobe-and-stone ranchhouse. Of Fought-With-Travis Johnny there was little left but two watery eyes, some cured-rawhide skin, and a pack of memories. He would sit for hours staring across the range, yearning for days long gone. But he was excitedly in the present this morning.

"Thet Britten! He's been shoutin' his lungs out for two days about somebody's rustled a herd he just bought last summer. He 'lows it's you, Charlie! Only three hundred in it, but he can't find twenty. He's ridin' over tomorrow to look for hisself."

Charlie was jolted. "What brand?"

"Panther Scratch. Ain't seen any such critters, have you?"

Charlie strode into the cabin and filled a sugar sack with crackers, canned tomatoes and coffee; he grabbed a heavy coat from a nail and started for the corral. Halfway there he stopped. Hell a'mighty, he couldn't outrun them! Not shoving three hundred steers! Whatever happened, he was stuck with those Panther Scratch critters. He would rather face the music here than be caught rushing them back across the river like a chicken-hearted rustler.

He sent Johnny on with the strays and sat down to wait, filled with virulent thoughts of Pete Hannibal. He'd hired his lying tongue to Britten along with his thieving heart! And now Charlie had walked into their trap, practically begging to be robbed!

A man rode in about three that day, not Britten but Hannibal himself. His square-cut face was dirty with dust and sweat and a look of anxiety was on him. He dismounted and walked stiffly toward the porch, where Charlie sat waiting. He struck a bullhide chap with his buckskin gloves.

"Damn him, Charlie, he's fixed us proper! Somebody told him what we cooked up. He told me I was going to sell that herd to him or he'd fire me and fix it so's I never worked again in Texas. What could I do? I had to sell to him. So now they're his steers and he's riding over there right now to look for them and shout 'Cowthief!'"

Charlie sat there smoking, Hannibal standing at the edge of the low porch before him. "What can we do?" he asked quietly.

Hannibal fished tobacco out of his chaps pocket. "Only one thing I can think of. If you sold out to me, we could pre-date the deed and claim you'd really been working for me. So the cattle being on your land wouldn't be a mark against you in court. He could send you to Huntsville for this, you know."

"I know," Charlie Kirby said, and kept his eyes thoughtfully on the ramrod while he picked a grain of tobacco off his tongue.

Hannibal licked the wheat-straw paper frowningly. "I feel like hell about this, boy. But you know the old man."

"I know you, too. Was this your idea to get the ranch or his to get me in a corner?"

Hannibal put the cigarette between his lips. "Charlie, you know me better than that?"

Charlie got up fast, gathering the whole force of his arm into one swing which exploded in the middle of Pete Hannibal's face. Hannibal reeled backward off the porch. He landed on his back in the dust and rolled over, struggling blindly. Blood jetted from his nose. He gave a snort which sprayed it over his chin and jacket as he came up. Charlie was after him viciously. He swung so hard he missed completely and staggered to catch his balance. Wild-eyed, bloody, Hannibal took an instant to measure and let his fist smash into the side of Charlie's head.

Charlie was down.

HE WAS on hands and knees, his ear ringing like a church bell. His mind focussed on the pebbly earth. Then with a jolt it came back, and he raised his head to see Hannibal wiping blood from his face and staring down at him. He hauled himself up. Hannibal moved in and struck. This time he missed. But Charlie was still too staggered to take advantage of it, and suddenly Hannibal found his cheekbone. He went back and sat down.

Hannibal laughed. "You got to be tough for this country, Charlie. You wouldn't have made out anyhow."

Charlie took four deep-lunged breaths, extracting everything from them. He put his right hand behind him and lunged up to crash against the ramrod. He slugged one deep into his belly. He felt it lift Hannibal off his feet and heard his tortured gasp. He hurled him away and chopped at his face until he fell.

Stunned, Hannibal rested a moment on all fours. Then he got to his feet again and swerved with blind and desperate suddenness into Charlie. He stopped cold and swayed. The pain of that punch spread through the cowman's hand and up his forearm. He heard Hannibal make a low snorting noise in his throat. He watched him go into a slow twisting fall to the ground.

He was in the cabin when he heard Hannibal ride out. Victory without a prize. All he had earned were a few hours in which to ride away from all he had worked for. Yet somehow the idea was appealing. Leave it all behind, the good with the bad, and find a country that did not take itself so damn seriously. He knew what Polly McGee would have to say about an idea like that, and he was a little ashamed. But now he had an excuse. He was boxed in like an ox in a slaughter stall. There wasn't a chance.

The memory of all he had put into the fight was suddenly upon him like a weight. He knew that he no longer had the bounce to fight a man as big as Britten.

Late that night a horse wakened him by whickering. He was at the door when the shots came, a shattering fusillade. He was aware of bullets tearing through the wall up along the eaves, hurling a rain of pebbly plaster into the room; of other bullets splintering the windows and battering the iron cook-stove. He dived for the floor. In the kitchen, where he slept, Johnny was screeching Spanish curses and the bellow of his old Sharps sounded once.

In the darkness, horses ran wildly. Fear and anger pumped through Kirby. He began working toward the wall where his Ballard rested. Then there was a sudden cessation of firing. The voice of Old Bob Britten came.

"This is a promise, Kirby—you cow-stealing river-jumper! A promise that if you aren't off this land in forty-eight hours, you won't be leaving at all. As far as I'm concerned, a good squatter is a dead squatter!"

THEY looked over the wreckage in the morning. Ropes had been thrown over the corral posts and the corrals pulled to pieces. There was not a window left in the cabin. A few beeves ranging near the headquarters had been shot down. Here was the answer to the question of a good little man ever beating a good big man: One little man, however good, could not accomplish a job like this in a month!

Fought-With-Travis Johnny took a morbid interest in seeing how bad everything was. "Shore did wreck the place," he decided. "We'll be two months gettin' back to normal."

Charlie shook his head. "We're washed up, Johnny."

Johnny peered at him. He spat, wiped his chin and asked closely, "Where were you born, Kirby?"

"Cass County. Why?"

Johnny chewed on it. "That's in Texas, all right. Texas fellers gen'lly run more to sand than you seem to."

Charlie found himself shouting. "Damn you bunkhouse fighters anyway! Everybody wants me to fight so they can run their two-dollar bets to a million! But put them in my place and they'd have quit two years ago."

"That's right," Johnny agreed. "That's what kind of mixes me up. I've seen you give back better'n you've git, up to now. A few slugs change the color of your Texas blood?"

Pale with anger, Charlie said, "You've got sixty dollars coming. I'll give you

thirty now and mail the rest. I'm leaving tomorrow. You're leaving now."

Johnny packed, saddled, paused to glance about. "Shore is a tol'able country. I may come back some time."

That night he slept alone in the wreckage of the cabin he had built for a wife who had not lived to enjoy it. He slept with melancholy and defeat. It went against his grain to knuckle down. And he loved this hard-bitten, blizzard-swept, sunburned country more than it deserved. The roots he had put down were tap roots, not shallow feeder roots. He thought about Polly McGee and her dad. They were licked, too, of course. Henry had made too many little fights and lost them to make a big one and win. He was used to losing. But Polly was a prideful girl, the kind of girl who could make a home on a hardscrabble prairie like this, and it would hit her hard to have to pull up and drift again. It seemed like they must all somewhere drift into a pocket together, all the little folks who wanted to be medium-sized, all defeated and worn-out with losing. He wondered how they would feel about men like Charlie Kirby, who had shown more strength and guts than most until the chips were down, the man who should have led but had cast loose when the smoke began to roll.

BUT in the morning there still seemed to be nothing for it but to pull out. He was loading the fag-end of his ranching truck and his dreams when the other wagon rattled in that afternoon. Up on the seat were Henry McGee and Polly. Behind them on his coon-footed bay slogged Johnny.

"Never 'lowed I'd be back this soon," Johnny said. "I brought you a buyer. Henry's going to ranch both places."

Shock hit Charlie. "Like hell!" he told the rancher. "They'll take you right down the line."

"What if we don't let them?" Polly inquired. Her face was fresh with the cold wind. She sat erect on the seat.

"There's one of you! There's thirty of him!"

"There is," McGee corrected, "three of us. One to load and two to fire. This is a nice piece of land, Charlie. I'll pay what Hannibal was going to, but it will take a spell. Maybe a couple of years."

"How long does it take to send a check from hell?" Charlie asked.

Polly stood. "Will you help me down?"

He gave her both hands and swung her to the ground. "I want to talk to you, Charlie," she said. Near the wreckage of the corral she turned to face him. If gentleness could be fierce, that was what was in her eyes, the gray eyes that could be like a mother's reproving a child she loves.

"If you were more of a hand to read the Bible, you'd understand what's been wrong with you. It says there's a time to weep and a time to laugh. You've had your time to weep, now. You can't work and weep at the same time."

It was as though she were confirming something he had known a long time. Quietness came into him. A hard core began to melt. He thought, Here is a woman who knows when to lead and when to push. And he listened for what else she had to say. But she seemed to have said it all; her face was softening and all her dignity and fire could not keep the quaver out of her voice.

"We've grieved with you, Charlie. Because we love you, too, and it hurt us to see you drifting. You're young. It's time to think about building things up, and—branching out, and—finding another wife." She suddenly hurried past him to the wagon, beginning to cry.

Charlie sat on the chopping block. The McGees were moving things into the cabin. Old Johnny drifted over and stood squinting up at the stony ridge behind the buildings; then down at the frost-nipped bosk of the creek. "I'll tell you how it was with Travis. This was before the Alamo, of course. It's down at Anahuac, and the greasers—"

"That's all right, if you're keen on a massacre. I'm not. I've got my own ideas who's caused most of this trouble. Here's the way I'll play it. . . ."

Daylight wore thin, the gold turned to green, and in the windy dusk they heard the horsemen coming. It was a tense and cheerless moment for Charlie. He lay in a patch of screwbean at the foot of the slope, watching them approach, and wondering how many would be boys whom he had ridden with. Had Britten been able

to buy Red Croft's gun? But when the men were close enough, he recognized only Hannibal, Britten, and Speck Mason. The rest were new. There were six in all.

Now they were in the yard and sitting their horses while Bob Britten and Pete Hannibal walked toward the cabin. Charlie put a shot against the bare ground near the horses. It struck and screamed away, and Fought-With-Travis Johnny hammered one out from the feed barn. The men hit the ground. The horsemen had their scared ponies to fight. In the midst of it, Charlie stood up.

"I want a talk with you, Britten!"

Britten squirmed around to snap his saddle gun against his shoulder. For an instant Charlie thought it was all over, that he had attempted the impossible: To reason with a totally unreasonable man. Pete Hannibal shouted back at him. "Time's past for talk, Kirby!"

"I'm talking to Britten. I want to ask one question."

HANNIBAL snapped up his gun and squinted along the barrel. Charlie was only an instant behind him, hating the ramrod for the liar and traitor he was, spoiling his only chance to make peace and knowing fully what he was doing. But Britten's arm came up and struck the barrel of the carbine so that the shot flew yards high. "I'll run this show!" he snapped. "What question, Kirby?"

Charlie talked fast. "Who sold you that Panther Scratch herd—Hannibal?"

Britten slowly got to his feet. "Where would he get three hundred steers? I bought them from a cowman in Montague County."

"Hannibal told me he'd been keeping a brand and wanted to get the cattle out of the way. I was to have the calves for pasturage. That's why they were on my place. But Hannibal wanted them there for a club to drive me out. With me out of the way, Bob, you'll have him for a neighbor."

"A cow-thief, and now a liar!" the ramrod shouted, and this time he stepped away from Britten when he threw the gun to his shoulder. Speck Mason, the bronc-fighter, spilled off his horse and knelt beside it to draw a bead on Charlie, and the other men were dismounting, too. They were obviously men Hannibal had personally hired for the Mill Iron, men he would count on.

Charlie squeezed his shot away carefully. Hannibal drove his shot at Charlie, a few inches high, and took two stumbling steps forward and sank down. Fought-With-Travis Johnny had tallied Speck Mason. Britten stood there undecided as to which side he was on; but when he finally fired, it was into the group of cowboys who had come with him, one of whom was already taking a bead on him. The shot sent the puncher stumbling back against his horse. He clutched at the saddle-horn and was dragged a few yards before he fell aside. The others stood where they were, their hands coming shoulder-high.

Britten took their guns and prodded them back into the saddle. "Now, ride, you penny-ante Judases!"

There was silence in the ranchyard after they left. It was nearly dark; in the gloom lay the bodies of the three men. The McGees stood on the porch.

"I'll send a wagon over for these carcasses in the morning," Britten said.

"Sure," Charlie said. "We've got this all squared away, now, haven't we? Don't see any reason why we should be tripping over each other any more. All I need is the land I've got."

Being the kind of man he was, Old Bob Britten could not admit to any fault. "One cull like that," he announced, "can lead a whole herd off a cliff. You bring those critters of mine home and we'll call it square." As he was about to mount, he extended his hand. "Adiós, Charlie. The boys will patch up the damage."

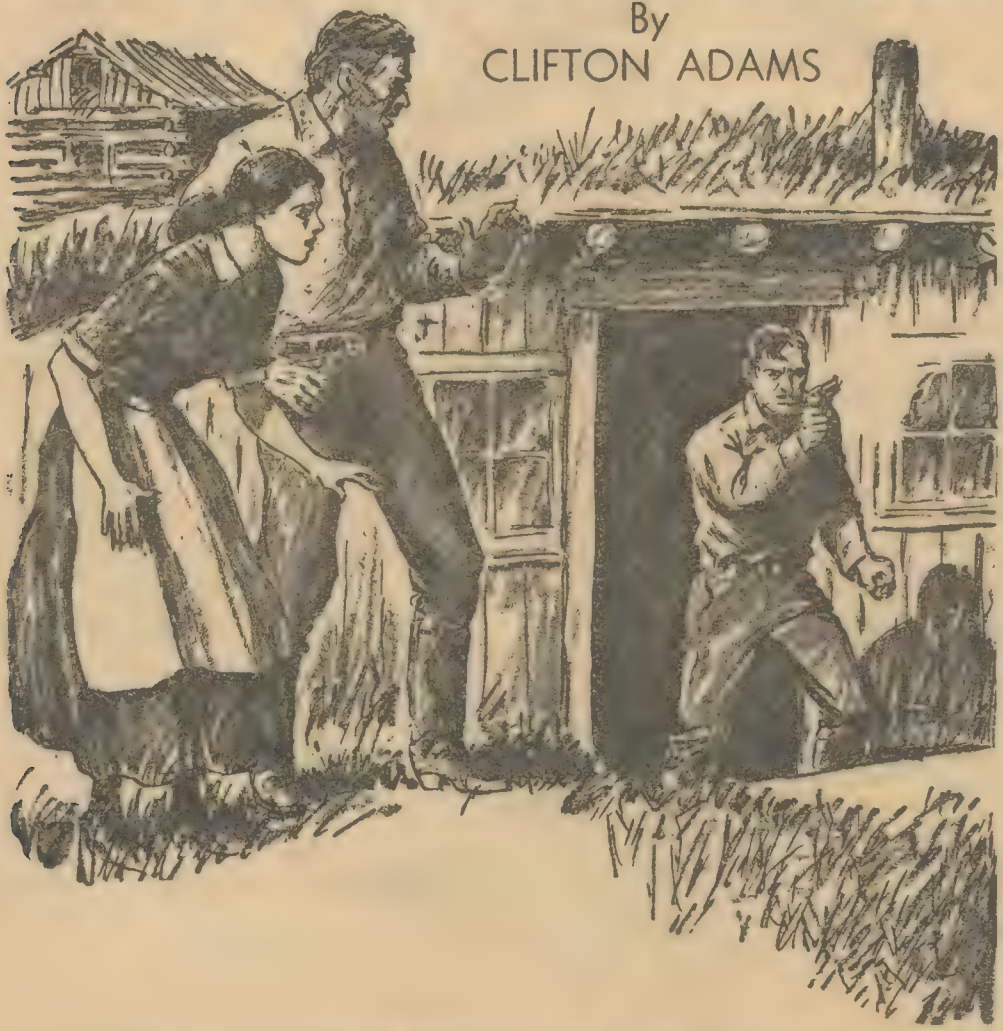
Charlie made the McGees stay the night. In the morning he helped them reload their wagon. He picked up a shoebox full of odds and ends like a darning egg, embroidery floss and assorted buttons. When he was alone with Polly he said,

"No reason to be taking things like these over, when you'll just have to be bringing them back soon, is there?"

Her eyes seemed to hold back their gladness, wanting to be sure of him. The gladness came, then, lighting her whole face. "No. There isn't."

THERE'S HELL IN HIS HOLSTERS!

By CLIFTON ADAMS



The bullet-ploughed pilgrim, with one thousand dollars on his head, lay unconscious in Noah Parker's No Man's Land sanctuary. "A slug in that man's brain would bring me a stake for life," thought Noah. But it would also bring the law—and Noah, himself, was playing hooky from the hangman's grim, gray gallows!

Smashing Novelette of Killer's Trail

He turned to get on his horse. He took one step, and that was all

CHAPTER ONE

Pilgrim from the Storm

THE rainclouds had gathered suddenly, the way rainclouds do in this flatland of the Panhandle country. Heavy black folds of them rolled in from the north and slid across the face of the sun. The short grass that had been parching in the September heat only a few minutes ago was now in cool shadow.

Noah Parker stood in the open doorway of his barn and sniffed the smell of rain as the first fat drops smacked the dry earth, squirting up little clouds of red dust. There would be no more plowing today. He sniffed again and the smell was good.

There were good things about this country, this place called No Man's Land. People did not ask questions here. A man could feel free in this strip of land that was neither Oklahoma nor Texas, and by some opinions not even the United States. If you came from Arkansas, it made no difference. If you had made a mistake once and had to leave Arkansas in a hurry, for reasons that not even your daughter knew, it did not make any difference, either, here in No Man's Land.

The drops were falling faster now. A sudden crash of thunder rent the clouds and a gray sheet of rain slanted down.

There is something relaxing and peaceful about rain that is almost hypnotizing at times. Noah stood in the open doorway, looking and listening.

Slowly, in a ghostly sort of way, a figure began to take shape there in the grayness. Noah grunted and stared hard. After a while he could make out the shape of a horse, and then the rider. The rain did not seem to bother them. The horse moved leisurely across the field that Noah had been plowing a few minutes before. The rider sat erect, his head held up so that the slashing rain cut across his face.

It seemed that it took them a long time to cross the newly-plowed furrows. The horse stepped carefully over each one. The rider sat motionless. After they had crossed the plowed ground the horse kept in the direction of the barn.

Noah Parker stayed where he was, under the shed. He had a feeling that if he went out in the rain to meet them that he would be making a fool of himself, that the horse and rider were not real at all, that it was some kind of trick the rain was playing with his eyes.

It was not a trick. The horse was a big black, glistening from the rain. As they moved closer Noah made out the rider. He was a big man. He sat easily in the saddle, in the way of men who spend more time on horses than on the ground. But there was something about his face. It was a quiet face, almost white, and the cold rain had no effect on it at all. Noah looked at it closely and got the feeling that he had seen it before. It was the face of a killer—and the thought struck Noah that a killer never wins.

A long time ago, maybe. It was like looking at a man's face that you don't remember as a man at all, but a boy. The horse stopped in front of the barn and the rider looked down.

"Mister," he said, "me and my horse have come a pretty good way. We'd be much obliged if you could see your way clear to let us use your barn for tonight."

His voice was soft. The words were hardly audible over the hammering of the rain. Noah Parker scratched at his stubbled face. There was something wrong, he could feel it. Something in the way the horse and rider had seemed to come out of nowhere. But he couldn't turn a man out into weather like this.

"Sure," Noah said. "You're welcome to the barn. . . ." He stopped.

THE stranger dropped the reins he had been holding and grasped the saddle-horn. He looked up and seemed to notice the rain for the first time. Then he pitched forward, sort of rolled on the neck of his horse and fell onto the wet ground.

"I'll be darn . . ." Noah Parker felt his mouth drop open stupidly. The stranger lay motionless and Noah watched as the rain splashed red mud on the white face. "I'll be darn," he said again. Then he shut his mouth, rushed out into the rain, got his hands under the big man's shoulders and pulled. When he made it back under the shed Noah hurried back to the door and yelled.

"Laura! Laura, come out here, to the barn!"

When he went back, Noah looked the stranger over carefully. He was wearing blue serge pants—that is, they were blue except from the knee down on the left leg. On the inside of the leg, where the rain hadn't got to it, it was red.

Noah got his pocket knife and slashed the pants. He grasped the leg tight in his big hands and held it until he heard his daughter at the barn door.

"I need a piece of cloth," Noah said quickly without looking around.

. . . A killer never wins

There was a little gasp of surprise. That was all. Then a rustle as she lifted her skirts, and a tearing sound. Noah took the cloth over his shoulder and made it tight above the wound. Laura didn't ask questions. She said quietly, "I'll go back and get blankets and hot water."

Noah waited. That was all he could do until Laura got back, that and wonder about the stranger. Where did he come from? How did he get that .45 lead in his leg? There were a lot of questions, and no answers.

He didn't have long to wait until Laura got back. She put hot water and blankets beside the stranger and knelt down. Noah turned the job over to her. She would know more about this sort of thing than he would.

She didn't speak until the job was done. Then she stood up and pushed at some hair that had fallen down on her forehead. "Any other man would have been dead. Do you know who he is?"

Noah shook his head. "They came up about the time the rain started, him and that black horse." He tried to think, but he shook his head again. "I don't know."

Laura knelt again and felt of the stranger's pockets. She found what she was looking for in his shirt, a long, tooled-leather wallet, the kind Mexicans make. She opened it and stared at it a long time before she said anything. Then she held the wallet up and Noah took it. "Well, anyway, we know now who he is," she said.

The name was tooled into the leather. There were a lot of fancy scrolls and a couple of words in Spanish too, but it was the name that jumped out at Noah Parker. *Tall Cameron.*

That name meant a lot of things. "Tall Cameron, Wanted For Murder." "One Thousand Dollars Reward Dead Or Alive." Those things flashed through Parker's mind, but those were small things. Small compared to what the name meant to him.

There had been Camerons in Arkansas. That's what the name meant to Noah Parker. He looked hard at the big white-faced stranger and tried to think. . . . Say a long time ago there had been somebody you didn't like. Say there had been a fight, a big one, the kind they have in saloons. A man is dead. You didn't kill him, but who's going to believe you. They'll pin you for murder, and they hang you for that. The only thing to do is leave, in a hurry, and find some place where nobody knows you. Some place like No Man's Land.

That's what Noah had done. It wasn't an easy land to live in; only the strong get by here. His wife hadn't been strong. Now there was only Laura, and himself—and a big white-faced gunman who wasn't a stranger, after all.

Maybe somewhere in the back of his mind Noah knew that sooner or later he would run across somebody who would recognize him. But he hadn't expected it to be like this. He hadn't expected to be this lucky.

He bounced the wallet in the palm of his hand. "A thousand dollars riding right up to our back yard." He spoke to himself. He had even forgotten that Laura was there. "A thousand dollars, alive—or dead."

THERE was only one thing to do. Noah couldn't afford to have anybody alive who knew him or who knew where he was. The thousand dollars was just a bonus.

Laura looked at him for a minute, then she looked at the big outlaw. "You're going to turn him in?" she asked quietly.

It wasn't the question so much that made Noah think something was wrong, but the way she asked it. It was almost as if she had said, "You're *not* going to turn him in?"

Noah looked at her for a long minute and tried to figure what he saw in his daughter's face. He couldn't be sure. "He's a killer," he said finally. "Not more'n a week ago he killed a marshal in White Rock."

"Because the marshal was a thief," Laura cut in with that quiet voice of hers. "Working for Spade Randal, chasing the farmers off their land because Randal wants it for his cattle." The words rushed out. She took a deep breath and looked amazed when she discovered that they were hers. But she had started now and she went on. "Would you send a man to hang because he tried to help people like us? Some day Randal might decide that

he wants our place too. And when he—"

Parker stared at his daughter. He didn't pretend to know much about women, but he guessed that even quiet women like Laura had to have their say sometimes and there wasn't much a man could do about it.

Suddenly the life went out of Laura's voice. The tautness left her face, and her shoulders seemed to slump just a little.

"I'm sorry, Father. I don't know what made me talk like that. I—I guess I'm just tired."

She was the daughter now that Noah Parker knew, the daughter he knew how to talk to. He led the black horse inside the barn and got the poncho off the back of the saddle. "It's all right," he said. "Here, put this poncho over your head and go back to the dugout. I'll take care of things now."

She nodded and took the poncho like he said. Noah Parker watched her as she went back into the rain. Then he put the horse away and went back to the outlaw.

It would be easy now. All he had to do was get a gun, squeeze the trigger and it would be over. Nobody would know the difference, nobody would care—except Laura, maybe. But it wouldn't be hard to explain it to her. The outlaw came to and tried to kill him. That's all there was to it. Then he would be free again. Nobody would know who he was or where he came from. Nobody would care. Now was the time to do it while it would be easy.

But sometimes a job can be too easy. If the outlaw could fight back, that would make it different. But he just lay there, hardly breathing. Noah Parker knew then that he couldn't kill him. Not now. Then his mind started racing ahead the way your mind will do when you are trying to get out of a job that you don't want to do.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tale of Tall Cameron

BUT a night in bed can do a lot of things to a man's planning. A night lying awake, your eyes wide, thinking. A night of remembering something that Laura had said. "Would you send a man to hang because he tried to help people like us?"

Maybe Cameron was all right. Maybe the outlaw didn't even remember him. Maybe. But Noah had had his chance to make sure that No Man's Land would keep on being a safe place for him and he had passed it up.

The next morning when he went back to the barn he went without his gun. That was a mistake.

The outlaw was still there. His face was still white. His eyes were closed and he breathed deeply and regularly as if he were asleep.

He was not asleep. The eyes came open and that amazingly soft voice said, "Stay where you are, mister." The blankets moved, a little feebly, but enough to get a hand out and fix a .45 on Noah's middle. After he had done that he took a deep breath as if he was holding the weight of the world in that one hand. "All right, mister, you can talk. Who are you?"

Noah stopped short and stared. That was all he could manage to do while looking into the muzzle of that .45. Quickly, he tried to remember if Cameron had had that gun the day before. He didn't remember seeing it. It had probably been stuck in his waistband under his shirt. Anxiously, Noah looked to see if the gunman recognized him. He couldn't tell. Could it be that Cameron didn't remember him?

Cameron's eyes squinted for seconds and he looked puzzled. Then the faintest smile in the world touched his mouth, and Noah knew the man had placed him.

"Noah Parker," the soft voice said. The smile widened just a little and then vanished. "People in Arkansas have been wondering about you. But I guess I'm not one to talk, am I?"

Noah didn't say anything. He cursed himself for not taking care of this man the way he had planned, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

The soft voice spoke again. "So you're a farmer now?" He dropped the gun heavily to his side but he kept it in his hand. "That's funny, in a way. I was a farmer too, me and my pap. We left Arkansas directly after you got mixed up in that killing."

Noah didn't try to explain that he hadn't killed anybody. It wouldn't be any

use. He just waited. He waited and hoped.

"But, like I say," Cameron went on, "I guess I'm not one to talk. I'm an outlaw. The Government's got a bounty on my head, the same as on yours. So I've got a proposition to make. You take care of me until I'm ready to ride again and I can forget that I ever saw you."

"And if I don't?"

The smile touched Cameron's mouth again. "I'm a good shot. But that's not the reason you'll take care of me." The smile vanished. "I said I was a farmer. Me and my pap had some bottom land over west of White Rock." He paused and his mouth got tight. He looked steadily at Noah. "We *had* some. Do you know the story?"

Noah shook his head. "I don't guess I do."

"Maybe you'll want to know what kind of men you're up against. Like I said, me and my pap had this little piece of bottom land, up until the cattlemen decided they wanted it for the water there and tried to run us out. My pap wouldn' run. He got killed. I wouldn't run either at first, but then I killed a marshal and I had to. So now I'm an outlaw because I tried to protect my property."

He thought about that for a while and his eyes took on a colorless, inward-looking appearance. "An outlaw," he said softly. "A killer. Yeah, I've killed some men. You're wondering how I got this hole in my leg. I got it by killing a man over in White Rock, one of the Randal's gunmen who was trying to push some friends of mine off their land. He pulled first and got me in the leg. But a jury wouldn't believe that. A posse ought to be going over this part of the country right now."

Sometimes a man does crazy things. Noah wasn't sure just what it was that made up his mind. It could have been the gun, that big .45 that lay beside the outlaw. But he didn't think that was it. It could have been that white face, or the feeling that some day Randal would try to move in on his own land. More likely it was just that sometimes you take a liking to a man. Noah knew how it felt to be hunted. And he knew now that they would never find out where he was, not from Tall Cameron.

"We'll move you up to the loft," he said. "The posse won't find you there."

TALL CAMERON had been right about the posse. About noon six of them came riding across the field that the outlaw had come through the day before. When they got closer Noah could see that Spade Randal and the new marshal were heading the group. They rode up to the front of the dugout where Noah and Laura were waiting. The two leaders swung down from their horses.

The new marshal was a big man. He had the thick, heavy features of a man who didn't rely on his thinking to get things done. Little red spots potted his face. That, and a big porous nose said he was a heavy drinker. Randal was different. He was the neat kind. He wore a frock coat and a clean shirt and a black riding tie like a gambler, or maybe a lawyer. His face had the lean, sharp look of both.

The marshal wheezed and spat on the ground. He wiped a dirty hand across his mouth and said, "You seen any

strangers around here, especially one ridin' a big black? He's probably got a hole in him somewhere."

The horse. . . . Noah had forgot about him, but it was too late to do anything about it now. He tried to look thoughtful for a minute. "No," he said, "don't recall seeing anybody like that. Don't see many people around here, though. What's he done?"

Spade Randal took a little step in front, just enough to let the marshal know he was taking over. "He killed one of our deputies yesterday. We trailed him as far as the creek down to the west of your place, but the rain came up then and we lost him. The Government has a thousand dollars on his head for killing a United States deputy over in White Rock. If you nab him the money is yours."

"That's a lot of money." Noah said. "I'll keep a sharp eye open, gentlemen, you can bet on that."

Randal's mouth turned up in a slight smile and he looked at Laura. "We got word that some of the farmers might be hiding him," Randal said. "But I know you folks wouldn't try anything like that. He probably tried to make it down the creek a way. He won't get far, not with that hole in him."

Randal and the marshal turned back to their horses, and mounted. For a few seconds Randal looked down at Noah and seemed to think. "This is a nice piece of land you've got here, Mr. Parker, but it seems to me that it would be better for cattle than farming. Have you thought of selling?"

Noah felt himself tighten, but he managed to keep his face straight. "I never thought of it," he said. "No, I don't think I'd be interested in selling."

Randal smiled. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Parker . . . and you, Miss Parker." The other men pulled their horses around, but Randal waited. "I may be seeing you folks again before long. If you change your mind about selling, let me know." He jerked on the reins and was gone with the rest of the posse.

Noah and Laura watched them cross the plowed field and head west towards the creek.

"We'll be next," Laura said quietly. "He's taken a fancy to our land and it won't be long until he tries to push us off."

Noah looked at her. He thought of some things to say, but somehow it didn't seem to be worth while saying them. He watched the posse until they reached a line of willows down at the far edge of the field and disappeared. Finally he said, "I'll get the horse and hide him in case they come back."

THE POSSE didn't come back. For the next few days nothing much happened. There had been no more word from Randal, and Noah had decided that he had got jittery over nothing. And Tall Cameron was better. He could stand on that leg of his; he could even walk a little with the help of a cane.

But there was something else, something that Noah Parker didn't understand, or like. He didn't pretend to understand women, but his daughter wasn't like other women, not to Noah.

Lately there was something different about her, and Noah didn't know what it was. When she spoke to Cameron her voice said one thing and her eyes another. These were the things that worried Parker. Slowly, he began to understand.

You don't have to know much about women to know when one is in love. He couldn't blame Laura. It wasn't much fun for her to be stuck on a farm like this with never a chance of going anywhere. He couldn't blame anybody.

Not even Tall Cameron. He hadn't done anything or said anything. But, like Laura, he didn't have to. It's easy to tell how a man feels about a woman, even when he doesn't do anything about it.

Cameron knew it wasn't any good. He would be hunted down and some day they would get him. Maybe that was the reason he said, "Thank you, Miss Parker," when Laura brought his meals to him. Or, "I'm much obliged to you, Miss Parker," when she changed his bandage. His voice said that, but that didn't change the things his eyes were saying.

There was nothing Noah could do. There are some men that you like without reason at all. They don't have to be good, they don't even have to think the way you do, you just like them. That's the way it had got to be with Tall Cam-

eron. He just happened to like the man.

By the time Tall was able to walk it was too late to do anything about it. Maybe things would have worked out someway on their own, but you can't live away from people completely, not even in No Man's Land. There is always somebody to ask questions. Somebody to demand something. Like the morning two men came riding from the east.

They came from the direction of White Rock. As they topped a small rise they framed themselves against an orange sun. They rode straight in their saddles. Even at a distance they looked like men with a purpose.

Noah had started for the barn, but when he saw the riders he turned back to the dugout.

"Tall—Laura—it looks like we're going to have company. Tall, you better stay inside. Me and Laura can take care of it."

Laura hurried up the steps and stood alongside her father as the riders got closer. Her quick breathing was the only sound she made. Noah looked down at her but her face told him nothing. Tall pushed the dugout door open and stood at the bottom of the steps looking over the ridge of dug earth. His face was white, almost as white as it had been that first day when he rode out of the rain. His mouth was pulled tight and his eyes had taken on that queer colorless look. He looked for a long time without making a sound, then he stepped back into the dugout. When he came outside again he had his gun stuck inside his waistband.

"Tall!" Noah rapped. "Get back inside, and put that gun away. Laura and I will take care of this."

Tall didn't move. He didn't even seem to hear.

"Tall," Laura said urgently, "please."

He looked up at Laura. He took his gun out and bounced it in his hand for a minute and seemed to think hard. "They're Randal's men," he said tensely. "He's taken a liking to your land and here's where he starts to push you off."

"He's not going to push anybody off!" Noah snapped. "And there's not going to be any killing. Now get back inside so they don't see you."

Tall looked quickly at the two riders. He bounced his gun once more and then pushed it back in his waistband. Then he silently went inside.

THE TWO men rode down the slope and as they got closer Noah made out their features. One was a thick, heavy man with most of his face covered with gray beard. He had a big nose that had been flattened sometime or other, probably with a barrel of a .45. He kept his heavy lips open constantly and did his breathing through his mouth. The other man wasn't any particular shape or size. A dead cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth and his eyes looked sleepy; aside from that they had no more expression than two holes in the mud.

They rode up in front of the dugout and the heavy one climbed down from his horse. The one with the cigarette sat and stared at nothing—or perhaps everything.

"You Parker?" the heavy man said. His voice had a high nasal twang due to his flattened nose. He hitched his gun belt and let his right hand hang limp by the butt of his .45. That might be for effect. It might not.

"My name's Parker," Noah said. "Why?"

The heavy head nodded. "This is your land here. It's for sale. The party I work for has decided to buy it."

"You must have the wrong place, mister," Noah said. "This land is not for sale."

The thick mouth grinned. "Maybe you didn't know it, but it is. We're buying it for a hundred dollars and giving you a week to get off. When we decide to buy something we buy it."

The gunman laughed. It wasn't a pretty laugh. It stopped abruptly. "We'll give you a day to think it over and get the papers ready," he said shortly. "Our party is what you might call a man of action."

Laura caught her breath and for a minute that was the only sound. Noah shook his head and tried to get words out but they stuck in his throat. A hundred dollars. . . . That wouldn't even pay for the barns. He wanted to yell, or curse, or fight. He couldn't do anything.

The heavy gunman laughed again. "Remember, Parker, tomorrow. We won't

make our offer again." He turned to get on his horse. He took one step, and that was all.

A gun roared. Flame leaped up from the steps of the dugout. The man jerked. Cameron appeared on the bottom step of the dugout and his gun roared again. The thick gunman jerked once more and grabbed at his rearing horse. He didn't make it. He doubled, half turned on one leg and then fell down on the ground. He was dead before he hit the earth.

The other man pulled hard on his horse and wheeled. Cameron stepped out and fired again but this time he was too late. The other rider had pulled his horse quickly around the dugout and had the animal stretched, running hard in the direction of town.

Tall Cameron cursed. He limped over to the dead gunman, turned him over with the toe of his boot and spat on the ground.

"Tall!" Laura was the first to speak. Her voice was tight, almost hysterical and ready to break.

"He didn't have a chance . . . " The voice was quiet and full of wonder. It took Noah a while to recognize it as his own. "Two times, right in the back."

Tall Cameron raised his head and looked at both of them. He punched the empties out of his gun and reloaded. "He would have done the same to me," he said shortly. "That's one thing you have to learn when they make you an outlaw: never give them a chance. You can't afford to give them one damn chance."

He slipped his gun back inside his belt and glared down at the dead man. "I've been looking for him for a long time." His voice was soft again. Deadly and soft. "He's the one that killed my pap. Right in the back, two times. He never gave anybody a chance either."

Laura tried to say something but all that came out was a sob. She stared at Cameron as if she was seeing him for the first time. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. Suddenly she turned, there was a quick little running sound and the slam of the dugout door. Silence. Then the sounds of sobbing, dry, rasping sobs that do no good to anybody.

Cameron stared at the dugout. He ran a hand nervously over his face and then wiped the back of his neck with a handkerchief. For the first time there seemed to be doubts inside him.

He turned quickly to Noah. "You understand, don't you? He would have done the same thing to me. He wouldn't have given me a chance."

Noah shook his head. "It's not for me to say what's right, or what's wrong. Anyway, we haven't got time to talk about it. Do you think you can ride?"

"Yes. I guess so."

"You'll have to. You're going to have to get away from here as fast as you can and ride as far as you can before the posse gets here. I've got your horse staked on the creek. I'll have to go get him. You wait in the dugout and get your stuff together and I'll be back as quick as I can."

Cameron didn't seem to be sure about anything now. But he nodded. "All right, whatever you say." He looked at the dugout. He didn't want to go in there where Laura was, but there didn't seem to be anything else to do. "I'd—I'd be much obliged," he said softly, so softly that Noah almost didn't hear him. "Much obliged if you'd . . . make it as quick as you can."

"I will," Noah said. He hurried off towards the line of willows on the creek.

CHAPTER THREE

The Smell of Death

HE FOUND the horse. The saddle and blanket were still pushed under a hollow log where he had hidden them. Noah got them, threw them up on the black and made them tight. Finally he was ready. All he had to do now was get the horse back to the dugout and put Cameron on him.

Noah took a look over the top of the creek bank to see that everything was all right.

He was too late. The gunman that got away had ridden fast. Off to the west, in the direction of town, he saw them. There must be a dozen of them anyway, and they were pushing their horses hard.

For an instant Noah watched. They were hardly more than specks now, but the specks were growing. There wasn't

time to get Tall away. The only thing he could do was to try to beat the posse to the dugout and try to bluff them.

He made it as fast as he could. He didn't dare run, that would make the riders suspicious, and that was one thing he didn't want now. But it was working out all right . . . so far. If he was in luck he could beat them by a couple of minutes.

He made the dugout just as the posse hit the plowed field. When he burst inside, Laura was sitting at the kitchen table, her arms crossed on the table and her face pushed in them. Every once in a while a little sound would tear itself out of her. It wasn't a sob, or a cry, just a little sound that didn't mean much of anything.

Tall Cameron stood beside her. He stood there motionless, staring, but not at anything in the room. His eyes were wide but they were looking inward again and only Tall Cameron could tell what he was seeing.

"I couldn't get the horse up here," Noah panted. "That rider that got away must have worked in a hurry because a posse is already on the way. They're coming across the field now—and damn' fast!"

Something like life jumped into Cameron's eyes. He stepped to the high window and looked out. He turned quickly from the window and looked at Noah and Laura. His mouth tightened and his voice was hard.

"There's no time to get away now. Noah, when they get here you go out and tell them that I had a gun on you this morning when the two gunmen were here. Tell them that you had been afraid to say anything. I killed one of them, got my horse out of the barn and made off to the north. Have you got that straight?"

Noah nodded. "I've got it."

Cameron thought hard. "Maybe. . . . Yeah, I think it would be better if Laura did it instead of you They'll be more likely to take a woman's word than a man's." He paused and looked at Laura. His face softened. When he spoke again his voice was soft too.

"Laura, will you do that? Just tell them that I had a gun on you and you couldn't do anything about it. Then I got away to the north."

Laura raised her head and looked at him. It seemed that she looked a long time. It wasn't until they heard the sound of horses outside that she spoke.

"All right," she said. She spoke very softly, almost as if there was nobody else in the room and she was speaking to herself. There wasn't any love in her eyes now, and there wasn't any hate. There didn't seem to be anything.

Tall Cameron took a deep breath and let it out. That was the only sound in the room. The sound of horses outside got louder and a man shouted, "Parker, are you in there?"

It was Randal's voice. Laura got up from the table, went to the door and opened it. Noah stood behind his daughter and Tall Cameron pushed back against the far wall in the shadows of the room.

TALL CAMERON had been right. Laura told it just the way he had told her and the men believed it. The horses reared as the men pulled them around to the north. The marshal's thick voice said, "Don't worry, ma'am, we'll get him all right." There was a squeak of saddle leather and the sudden ham-

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mering of hoofs and the horsemen were gone.

Laura didn't turn around. She stood in the doorway until the sound of the horses faded, then she started up the steps. "I'll get the horse, Father. I'll be back in a little while."

Noah didn't argue. He watched his daughter as she went up the steps and disappeared in the direction of the creek. Then he turned around to look at Tall Cameron—and the big, ugly muzzle of a .45.

Cameron's face was drained white. He squeezed that gun in his big hand, the hammer back. His mouth twitched. That was his first movement. He began to shake. His gun hand wavered and he eased the hammer down and put the .45 back in his belt. He wiped the back of his hand across a wet face and finally spoke.

"I would have killed her." His voice was dead. "If she hadn't done like I said I would have killed her. . . ." His face was whiter than ever now.

He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face. "I never actually took my self to be a criminal before. I always figured I was helping my people, and the men I killed were men that needed to be killed. I guess killing gets to be a habit, and when you've done enough of it, it gets to be the easiest way to settle your problems. Anybody that gets in your way. Even people you love. Yes, even the people—the girl. . . ."

Noah didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. He stood there with his back to the door and looked at this strange man. Suddenly that's what he was, a strange man—to himself and everybody else. A man who wore his heart in his holster, a man who thought with the steel and powder he held in his hand. It came natural to him.

It isn't pleasant to see a killer look inside himself, and for the first time see himself as he really is. It isn't a pleasant thing at all.

Time passed. It seemed a lot of time, but Noah couldn't be sure about that. He stood by the door and didn't move until he heard Laura out front with the big black. He moved to one side as Cameron limped across the room to the door and up the steps. Noah Parker followed him slowly.

There wasn't any talking. No goodbyes. Tall Cameron patted the horse once and climbed up, slowly because of his leg. He pulled the horse around to the south and then hesitated for just an instant.

"I'm much obliged," he said. He did not turn around, or look at them. "For everythin'." He nudged his horse and headed for the south at a gallop.

The other horse came suddenly from behind the barn. Noah started to yell, but for some reason he couldn't. Spade Randal had his gun drawn. A faint little smile played around the corners of his mouth. Maybe Randal knew more about women than most men, or maybe it was just a gambler's hunch that made him wait there behind the barn while the rest of the posse rode off. Noah didn't know. When Cameron got even with him he rode out and the gun in his hand roared its deadly message.

Cameron jerked once and his horse wheeled. That .45 appeared in his hand and crashed. A look of great amazement came across Randal's face. He dropped his gun and looked foolishly at his empty hand. Suddenly he grabbed at his stomach and doubled and fell from his saddle. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Cameron's black horse reared once and headed again for the south in a hard run. He could run easily now. His saddle was empty. Spade Randal couldn't miss, not at that distance. But Randal, himself, would never fight again.

It had happened fast. Noah hadn't moved. Laura gasped once beside him and he put his arm around her and pressed her face against his shoulder. There was no sound.

Even the air was motionless. A big shadow slid over the flat land. Off to the north rainclouds had gathered suddenly. That meant rain to the farmers. Rain to soak the land and make it clean, to burst the seed wheat and push the shoots up into the sun. That was the help that farmers needed. The smell of rain and not the smell of death.

THE END

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Twenty years was a long time to be a sheriff

REWARD OF MERIT

Surely, Sheriff Tim Conally thought, there might be some small reward for him on this, his last day of twenty years roddin' the law.... Perhaps a watch from the cow-folks he'd served so long; or mebbeso a card of thanks. But no, there was nothing until the moment he surrendered his star forever. Then it came: the cruelest, meanest—and oddly, the most valued—gift an honest man could ever hope for. . . .

SHERIFF Tim Conally dried his hands on the huck towel, and a sense of loneliness and defeat tugged at him. Below, he heard Martha moving about the kitchen, humming to herself, and annoyance came to his mind that she did not realize the full meaning of this day.

In only a few hours, he would no longer be sheriff. The badge he had worn for twenty years would be on young Barry Cathcart's vest, and he would be just another small rancher in the valley. The herds would come through, and the cattlemen and toughs would no longer have him to reckon with when trouble started.

"A hell of a note!" he growled to himself in the mirror.

True, his hair was white and his face was lined. But his shoulders were as square as they had been years before, and his hand was steady with a gun. It was just that the damned city council had decided it wanted young officers, and so that meant Tim Conally would have to go.

His glance moved over the neat room, and he sighed. This house, a few dollars in the bank and a small spread, only these things had he to show for his years as a

peace officer. It was little enough, now that he remembered the money which could have been his for a bit of side-stepping and looking the other way when crookedness came to the town. Maybe he hadn't been so smart, at that.

He hung up the towel and left the room, the stairs sounding solid beneath his boots. Martha smiled at him from the kitchen range, and he grinned, liking the soft dimple at the corner of her mouth. Thirty years of marriage hadn't dimmed her beauty, he thought, but had only made it clearer. True, her hair was as white as his, but even so, she was young in spirit, and that was all that counted.

He ate slowly, as he always did, coffee steaming and black in the heavy cup. Martha read the latest letter from their son back East, and their gazes met in pride over some of the words. Jim would be a good lawyer, a great lawyer, some day.

He finished breakfast and went slowly into the hall, reaching for the worn belt and holster. He buckled it about his flat waist, and the weight was natural to his body. Absently, he touched the badge at his chest, and when he looked up, Martha was watching him.

"It will be strange for a while, Tim," she said, "but at least I won't have to worry about your being shot at any longer."

"Sure," he said, "I'll just mildew away and plant flowers. Lord, what a thought."

She smiled and touched his arm. "Barry will do all right," she said. "After all, he's been your deputy for five years. He's almost as good as you."

Tim Conally shrugged. "He's all right," he admitted dourly.

She laughed aloud. "The thing wrong with you, Tim, is that you expect parades and speeches and a gift because you are retiring."

Tim grinned sheepishly. "What's wrong with that?" he countered. "I mind the times I've chipped in on gifts when other men have gone out of office. Why not something for me?"

Her voice was very gentle. "Because you're a lawman, Tim," she said. "Because lawmen don't get gifts."

He lifted his hat. "It's time they did," he said shortly.

He kissed her and then went through the door. He turned to wave and then went around the side of the house to the small corral. The bay watched him from behind the pole fence, and he rubbed her muzzle gently, as he had done for five years.

"Last day, Blinky," he said. "After today, we both go out to pasture."

The bay snorted, as though she understood, and he laughed aloud.

"You old fraud!" he said, and went to get the saddle.

MINUTES later, he rode down the main street of the town. It wasn't as it had been when first he had ridden in thirty years before. Then, it had been a small fort, squatting in the valley and continually on guard against marauding Indian bands. Now it was a town, close to fifteen hundred people.

Cattle had built it, and there were rumors the railroad was coming in before long. There were two churches and a dozen stores, and the town council was continually talking improvements. Of course the saloons and gambling halls were still here, but they had calmed considerably in the years he had been sheriff.

Blinky danced nervously in the sunlight, and Conally touched her neck, calming her. Always was she like that, as though still a colt, and it amused him.

He saw that the Three Aces Saloon was already open for business, and he reined that way. Dant Clayton glanced up from the doorway.

" 'Morning, Sheriff," he said, and his hatred for Conally was a naked thing.

" 'Morning," Tim Conally said shortly. "Did that tinhorn pull stakes?"

Clayton nodded. "He was on the early stage."

Conally spat thoughtfully. "Good," he said. "And a word of warning. Try that bottom dealing business again, and the Three Aces will get a house-cleaning, starting with you."

He turned his horse, not waiting for an answer, and went on down the street. Wang Soo, the Chinese laundryman, waved cheerfully from behind the steamy window of his shop. A rancher called a greeting, then turned back to the smithy who was shoeing his horse. A few people

were on the street, and he spoke to all, knowing them, as he did everybody in the town.

He didn't look back at Clayton. He disliked the man, as he did all the gamblers in the town. They contributed nothing, only took away, and because of them his fight for observance of the law had been hard. They had bucked him at every opportunity, almost winning at times. And now, thinking of the fact he would no longer fight them, he was angry that the passing years had caught up with him.

Blinky automatically stopped at the hitching rack before the sheriff's office. Conally dismounted, looping the reins about the rack, and went into the office. Barry Cathcart looked up from the desk, and his even teeth flashed in a smile. "Hear you worked over the Three Aces last night."

Tim Conally smiled. "Something like that," he admitted. "Just sort of cleaning up a few loose ends for you."

The deputy flushed. "Look, Tim," he said embarrassedly, "I don't want you to think I bucked for this job of being sheriff. I—"

"Forget it," Tim Conally said roughly. "Hell, I took it away from another man, so I've got to pass it on." His gaze slid about the room. " 'Course I sort of hate to think I won't be coming back."

He unpinned the badge from his vest, turning it over and over in hard fingers. The silver was worn away in spots, and the engraving was shallow now. Twenty years was a long time for a sheriff.

"It's yours, Barry," he said. "I hope you wear it with as much pride as I did."

"Sure, sure, Tim," the younger man said, accepting the badge.

Tim Conally sighed. This was his reward for twenty years of service. Here in a dusty little room, he was turning his life over to another man. Here, he was ending something which had begun so many years before he had difficulty in recalling details.

Here were no speeches, no handshakes, nothing at all. Just a tired old man handing a worn badge to a young man who, too, would be tired some day.

"Well," he said, feeling strangely helpless, "well, I guess that's all."

He swung about as the door opened. A boy stood there, a huge box in his arms. "It's for you, Sheriff," he said.

"For me?" Pleasure touched Tim Conally. Maybe, after all, somebody was remembering his twenty years of service. "Who sent it?"

"Dant Clayton. He and some of the others down his way called me in from the street and told me to deliver it to you. Said it was a farewell present."

"Clayton!" Tim Conally said, then nodded at the desk. "Put it there."

He watched as the package was placed on the desk, then flipped a quarter at the boy. With the kid gone and the door shut, he swung his gaze to Barry.

"Clayton!" he said briefly.

Barry nodded. "Can't figure it," he admitted. "God knows, he hates your guts."

Tim Conally shrugged. "One way to find out is to open the box," he said.

He broke the heavy strings and drew back the flaps. Whiteness came to his face, and his lips thinned. Barry Cathcart, standing now, swore viciously. "The stinking lice!" Cathcart said harshly.

The box was half full, rotted garbage mixed with manure, a dead cat stretched in horrible rigidity on top. A note was there, skewered to the lid with a stick, and Tim Conally drew it free with a hand that trembled.

So long, Lawman, the note read. *Best wishes from all the boys!*

Sheriff Barry Cathcart was buckling on his gun belt, his face a stony mask.

Tim Conally read the note again, rigidity in his shoulders.

"We'll see, we'll see!" Sheriff Cathcart was saying.

Then Conally laughed. The sound came from deep within his chest. This was his farewell gift, this was his reward for twenty years of service to the town. No speeches, no handclasps, just a vicious note and stinking gift from a bunch of two-bit gamblers and saloonkeepers.

"No," he said to Cathcart. "No!"

"But—" the sheriff began.

Tim Conally shook his head. This truly was a reward, this was an ending to a career which had helped build the country. This was the last brutal act of men who feared him as all those who are dishonest

(Please turn to page 98)

THE SEARCH

By GEORGE C. APPELL

He saw the rider dismount near the shack and take something from the saddle

Three armed men prowled the night over the vast Queen range—and one was a killer! The mounted men were known as Brashoff, the sheriff, and Storrs, top hand for Queen. The man who skulked afoot was just known as Frank—and God alone knew the name of the killer!

THE MAN in the cave came awake slowly, eyes wide to the damp darkness beyond the entrance, ears hearing the rustle of rain brushing across the hills to the desert beyond. He thought, I'm still safe.

He gripped hard on the revolver pushed butt-first into the sand by his cheek. He pulled the gun loose and slipped it into his shirt, then got to his feet and walked on oiled boots to the lop-sided aperture in the rocks. He looked long through the thinning rainfall at the prickle of lights in the distance; he picked out the tiny green

globes of the hotel and the red dots marking the saloon and the sick yellow smear of the New York Store. Even as he watched, the smear sank into the darkness and the store was closed. Nine o'clock, then. It must be nine o'clock. He couldn't see his watch in the dark, and felt grateful for that too. There's something protective about nightfall: it won't stop a bullet and it won't stop a voice, but it hides so many things. Perhaps you can't see anyone else, but nobody else can see you. And when murder is the reason you don't want to be seen, nightfall is very important.

The man raised a hand and felt his face, fingered it as if he was finding it for the first time. He needed a shave, his hair was tousled and a flat taste smarted his mouth. He scraped hard fingers over the bristle of a one-day beard and, suddenly, yawned. He felt tired with the tiredness of nerves; his body was strong and his mind was clear, but the nerves were wearing him out. Cat and mouse . . . hide and seek . . . move and check-mate. . . . He yawned again and shivered slightly in the chill coming off the cold-washed desert. The rain was stopping.

The slow *click-tock-click-tock* of water dripping sounded loud on the rocks, and that made him feel better. It was hard to hear things through rainfall, and he had to hear before he was heard. Milky stars were blurring through the damp haze of the sky, and it was almost time to go. But still he waited, watching the lights of the town. He thought, Maybe Brashoff'll leave early tonight and I can talk to Evelyn alone. Maybe Brashoff won't be there . . . No, he was always there . . . Maybe tonight he'll tip his mitt and I can —no. Not yet. Don't be hasty; you'll slip. . . .

Some horsemen flicked along the single string of street lights, riding north toward the Queen Ranch barrier, and the man in the cave hoped Brashoff would be with them. He was supposed to own a piece of Queen, and he rode out there a lot, sometimes at night, sometimes at dawn, to catch the hands off-balance. Kissing-off. Creeping up on them. He was that kind.

Two weeks before, a week before the man had gone into the hills, a square-skirt rider from Queen had told him about Brashoff. "He ain't around. He's out lookin' f'r the killer, but he'll be back. He thinks more for cattle money than doin' his job, which ain't much. Wasn't much anyway, till they found ol' Jarvis crushed up. . . . A man'd do that, he's dangerous."

"You say he'll be back?" He'd looked fast at Evelyn then, and her eyes went wide.

"Tomorruh, mebbe, if some smart hoss don' roll him."

So it had been the cave after that, and the waiting, always the waiting. Like the army, he thought. Rush to a place and stand ready, and wait. Rest on your gun and wait. Think. Tremble. Slide into nerves and shake and—wait. Then try to aim. Try it.

He tried it. He lifted the revolver off his hip and raised it at the green lights of the hotel. He centered the sight blade on the kitchen window, the only one he could see, and pretended to pull the trigger. But hell, he thought. You don't shoot that way. That's for picnics. You shoot this way in my business.

He clapped the gun to his hip and whirled. Good practice, that. He thought of Brashoff again, and this time he grinned.

THE water wasn't dripping any more; the stars were bright chips now, not murky, and the desert lay clear beyond the town. He eased the gun into his shirt and stepped out of the cave. Down to the right he saw it on a shoulder of land, a gleaming of wet wood refracting sharp starlight. The shack, there, and he'd have to circle it wide. Jarvis was dead, Jarvis was buried, Jarvis' wealth was gone—the rich, heavy samplings of a lifetime spent scrabbling in the hills, rocking the streambeds for the little black glintings for which a man would spend a lifetime on his knees. For which a man would kill, crush, murder. Jarvis had never killed anybody, had hardly talked to anybody. It had taken a patient person to find the secret, to assay its worth, to conclude to murder. A lot of waiting had gone into it, but the payoff was high. Nobody knew how much. Jarvis had never talked. But very high, they all agreed. High enough for murder, anyway.

The man studied the shack in the starlight for another moment, waiting to see if anyone was there. He didn't want to go down, didn't want to get near it. He

wasn't afraid. Jarvis was dead and a ghost can't kill you. But maybe Brashoff would be lurking, waiting. Anyone caught soft-shoeing around that shack with its crust of browning blood on the broken floor was likely to feel a .44 jab into his back and hear a voice ask, "What brings you here?" That would be Brashoff, or one of his men.

The man left the shack on his right and moved toward town. He tip-toed around the bowl of starshine in a crack in the rocks, during rainy season a permanent puddle. He didn't want to get his boots wet and have them squeak; wet leather has brought empires and marriages crashing to the finish. Human lives can be stopped at its sound.

Past the puddle, he walked easier, walked faster. He followed the down-trail, and in the folds of the foothills lost sight of the town. Good enough; they'd come up behind it anyway, before anyone saw him. He smelled the cavvy long before he saw it; sniffed the clutching mustiness of damp hides huddled close, waiting for herding. There was no spur line out here, only the trails. So the Queen riders had to herd beef forty miles to the railhead.

He crept past the cavvy and lowered himself flat; he lay for five minutes, looking at the kitchen light, thumb to pulse to count time. Once he saw Evelyn pass the window, a plate in one hand. She was laughing, but it was with her father, not Brashoff. Her father ran the hotel.

Two riders dismounted out in front, snaffled reins and disappeared toward the doors. One was square-set; the other, string-muscled and small. Storrs, the top hand, was the little man. Brashoff the big one.

Top hand for the Queen was nice work. You had to be hard; and you had to be better than good. You had to be honest, too—no watering percentages your way on stock turnover. Honest and hard, that was Storrs. Flint-faced, straight-eyed.

The man watching the window wondered what Storrs was doing with Brashoff. Maybe Brashoff was deputizing him for the hunt; then with Storrs away, Brashoff could perform paperwork wonders with the Queen accounts, if he was crooked. If he owned a big piece. If he had access to accounts. If—but hell, he was sheriff. He could say, "Open the books. I think Jarvis. . . ." But no. He wouldn't try that. Too obvious, and Brashoff was clever.

The man's pulse clocked seven minutes, then eight. At ten, he got to his knees and opened the middle buttons on his shirt. He drew the sandy butt of the gun into the opening and let it rest there, ready. It would have to be ready if Brashoff saw him. Even if Brashoff heard him.

He walked quietly through the purple patch of shadow toward the pond of light from the kitchen window; he skirted the yellow border and came up under the window, to one side. He tapped once.

The sound of a plate clicking on wood followed the tap. And then the window was opened a few inches and Evelyn's voice breathed, "Frank?"

"Yes . . . all clear?"

"No, he's out in front. Go away, Frank."

"I like it here. Besides, I'm hungry."

"Frank, you're taking awful chances."

He smiled. When a man takes a chance for a woman, he's making a present to himself. "I think I'll stay."

"Oh-h—Frank." It was a weary whisper. Then the window sighed shut and her footsteps crossed the kitchen and were gone.

HE FELT his way along the back of the building to the corner and stood pressed against the boardings, balanced on the balls of his boots, ready to slip back silently. But no one was in the yard; the darkened New York Store lay empty next door. He edged down the side of the building to the screened window of the barroom and stretched high in his oiled boots and clung with his fingertips to the sill. Brashoff and Storrs were at the bar, their backs to the window; Evelyn's father was at the desk in the hall. The bartender sat half-asleep, head down.

". . .the shack," Brashoff was saying. He bent one arm and drank, and his leather vest flopped open and showed the gray metal badge on his shirt. He dropped his arm and the vest swung forward. "I bin up there, Storrs, but I couldn't find any prints, an' it's bin rainin' a lot an' prints would be there if he'd come back."

Storrs shook his head and the wire-

muscles of his neck twitched. He removed a cheroot from his thin lips and regarded its glow. "You think he'll be back?"

Brashoff shrugged heavy shoulders. The watcher at the window smiled at the ham-fleshed bulk of the man, and tried to judge how long it would take him to throw down. Seconds too long, probably, with all that fat in the way of the draw.

"Who knows?" He eyed the ceiling. "Killer always returns to the scene of the crime, don't he?"

Storrs dropped the cheroot into a cuspidor. "Like the return of the greenhorn?"

Brashoff laughed. A harsh laugh that hacked spittle from his mouth. "How big a sucker you think he is, Storrs?"

Storrs said, "You're the sheriff . . . Well, good-night." He hitched up his belt and tugged down his hat and strode out.

Brashoff called to the bartender. "A double barley." He tilted his head and listened to the chopping of hoofs as Storrs rode north for the ranch. "Funny gent, ain't he?"

"Who's that, Sheriff?"

Brashoff swallowed half the whiskey. "Storrs." He gazed at the bartender. "I guess he's honest."

"Storrs?" The bartender smiled. "Shore he's honest. Jus' buh-cause the Queen's losin' money don't mean—"

"What?" Brashoff held the rest of the whiskey in his mouth for a breath; then he swallowed and repeated, "What?"

The bartender seemed surprised. "Don't you know it? You got a share or two, ain't you, Sheriff?"

Brashoff put down the glass. He nodded. "Yeah, but I didn't know the Queen's affairs was common knowledge." He flapped shut his vest. "Have a nighter on me."

"Thanks, Sheriff . . . say, you think the sharp you spoke of—you think he's got away?"

Brashoff turned in the doorway. "Man killed Jarvis? Hell, no! One thing—he's a stranger. Must be. Wouldn't be one of the local boys. Another thing, no stranger'd ever cross forty miles of desert without drawin' some attention." Brashoff stabbed a finger at the floor. "He's around here, an' we—I'll—get him. Good-night."

The watcher lowered himself from the sill and stepped quickly to the rear corner; he paused, head turned, listening. But Brashoff rode south, toward the hills.

THE window was open again when he reached it, and a brown paper package was on the ledge. He took it and thrust it inside his shirt and smelled the warm meat and felt the heat of it on his skin. "Evelyn?"

She raised the sash a bit and leaned out. "Frank, he's gone."

"I know." They heard her father tell the bartender to close up; he called from the hall, and she answered.

He started upstairs. "I'm going to bed. You better come too."

"I'll be right up, father." The bartender said good-night on his way out, and the two were alone. "Frank, please go."

He studied the outline of her face, an oval of white in the dark frame of her hair. The light glimmered on it and showed the smoothness of it drawn back to a knot on her neck. "Evelyn, has Brashoff been around?"

"He was here."

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"No. Not that." He lowered his voice. "I mean—around you?"

"Sometimes." She moved a shoulder. "He doesn't bother me."

"But he might."

She shook her head and frowned and faced away and bit her lip. "Frank, I wish you'd—you'd tell me."

"About myself?" He reached out and squeezed her bare arm, not hard but firmly. And released it. "I will, someday soon. Evelyn?" She faced him, still frowning, and he tried to smile. "Believe in me, will you?"

She moistened her lips and took a little breath. "I'm trying to."

Then he smiled. "Fine. Know what?"

"What?"

"This is foolish, you up there and me down here, with a window in between."

She hesitated. A lone rider trotted up the street, northbound for the ranch; far out on the desert a coyote filled the stillness of the stars with a wail.

"Evelyn?"

She closed the window and turned out the light; and a minute later was coming toward him. "Just for a second, Frank."

They stood in silence, each wanting to speak, neither knowing how. And then he remembered the greenhorn. "Tell me something." The distant call of the coyote came again and ended in a yelp. "That ol' hound's been bothered by—" He broke off. Brashoff, of course. Riding south for the hills.

"Tell you what?"

"Something Storrs said. About a greenhorn."

She started to laugh, and placed a palm over her mouth and glanced quickly upward. "I'm sorry, Frank." She lowered her head, smiling now and nearer to him. "The greenhorn, though. You're like one. You come to town when there's a lot of fuss, and spend a week, and the sheriff comes back, and you leave. Now you're scared."

"Tell me about the greenhorn."

"Oh, it's just a local thing. A legend, you'd call it." She turned away, frowning again. "There's an old Indian story about—about when a man's murdered." She looked directly at him.

"Yes?"

"Well, years ago, a greenhorn—you know?—got lost in the hills. He ran out of water in the desert and went into the hills to find some. And they say he did find it, in a little pool near a cave. He was found in the cave much later. Someone had killed him to get his jewelry—his watch, and rings. So the legend says that he'll return someday, when there's been a murder, and warn people about the murderer. The Indians used to say his ghost will rise from the pool."

"Are you superstitious?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Everybody is—or is afraid to be. . . That all?"

"No." She said it bitterly. "Not about this greenhorn."

"Me?"

"You. I—I liked you, Frank. I still do. But I don't understand anything about you!"

"Sh-sh . . . the town'll wake up—if that's possible." He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her to within an inch of his eyes. "Now, look, Evelyn: you're trusting me, and that's all I ask. You won't be sorry."

"Does it make any difference?"

"It might." He took a breath. "Evelyn, for the week I spent at the hotel, you formed enough of an opinion of me to trust me now. Evelyn, do you think I killed Jarvis?"

She twisted away and stepped back. "Please don't ask me that." She held out a hand. "Good-night, Frank."

"Is that what you think?"

At the back door she turned. "That's what everyone in town thinks, or at least they're looking for a stranger who answers to your description." She opened the door behind her. "I think that stranger had better . . . move on."

The door shut, and he was alone in the moonlight.

HE AWOKE to the warm press of sunlight on his face and spun to a sitting position, gun drawn. But he was alone in the cave, and the only sounds were the twittings of birds early risen. He crouched in the entrance and looked north and south; and southward saw the rider coming up from the desert.

He sank back into the cave, revolver to hip, breath coming fast. If it was Brashoff . . . Brashoff would kill him, would

blow his head open while he slept . . . Brashoff would never give a man a chance.

The rider dismounted on the shoulder near the shack and took something from his saddle. It was a hand-axe; he turned toward the shack, hefting the axe, and stepped to the door.

The man in the cave put his revolver across his arm, hunkered low behind a rock and sighted the blade on the fleshy face. He forced himself not to fire.

"So simple, now," he breathed. "Drop the sheriff and. . ." And what? Steady, he warned; and drew back the gun and squinted through the sunshine at Brashoff. The sheriff went inside.

The noise of nails being drawn scraped the morning air and sent the birds scattering to the skies. There was silence broken only by a bootfall; then hammering. The blows were quick, strong, sure. Silence again, and Brashoff came out and strapped the axe on the saddle. He looked all around before he mounted: at the hills, the near trees, the rocky face where the cave was. He lingered his look at the rocks; he seemed to brighten as he stared.

He mounted, eyed the rocks again, and headed down the shoulder toward the flat land of the desert.

Forty miles, the man in the cave recited in his mind. Forty miles across country, and a stranger could never make it without drawing suspicion. Forty miles. . .he wanted desperately to go one half a mile, to go to the shack and pull it apart and trace the blows of Brashoff's axe. But that would be stepping into the net; that would be showing his hand, tipping the play. . .a .44 in his back, and a grated question. No, he couldn't go half a mile, couldn't go half a foot. Had to stay in the hills, like an animal. Waiting for darkness. For protection.

Darkness came slowly, came creeping, like all things a man waits for. The yellows and browns of the flat country turned to gray, shot through with purple; then blue, light blue, and the sky deadened and sallowed, and twilight shrouded the world.

He was looking at the pool beyond the cave, the natural rain basin in the rocks, when a movement ticked the tail of his eye. He thumbed back the hammer of the gun and froze. Someone was climbing through the foothills toward the cave; someone was coming to find him. Someone who had timed the trip to coincide with the darkness.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes and peered through the dusk and raised the gun from his hip to his shoulder; he stretched flat and braced his cheek against the butt. One shot. One fast shot would do it. And he could snap off two before they got him, should there be more than one man coming. The stars shone in the pool and he switched his eyes from the darkness to the brittle reflection and tried to imagine a ghost rising from the water. He wondered what the ghost would look like, when it came.

Footfalls crunched lightly on the trail . . .He counted their cadence. Two feet, one person. Closer now, but still light to the step. Then they stopped.

He snicked back the hammer and took a slow, deep breath and let it out evenly. Inhale. . .exhale. . .quietly, silently. . . .A shoe creaked as it bent to a step. Whoever this was had no respect for caution.

Then she was standing in the starlight of the yet moonless night, arms held half forward, groping. "Frank?"

He lowered the hammer and put the gun in his shirt. He stood up and left the cave and went to her. "Who's taking chances?" He lay a finger to his lips and nodded to the right. "The Jarvis place."

"Yes, I know." The dim light from the night sky showed the paneled sheen of her swept-back hair, winked slightly on the dark wings brushing her temples. "Frank, you can't stay any longer."

Over her head, beyond the foothills, he saw a horseman trot past the lights and flick from sight to southward; a second rider led his horse away from the green hotel lights.

"I don't plan to, Evelyn. I think I'll be back in San Francisco next week."

"Oh?" The question hung between them like an empty picture frame. "Why there?"

"It's where I come from, that's why." He saw the second rider swing a leg and mount; the horse was pale green for the turn of its head, then dark as it trotted south past the lights. "You shouldn't have come up here."

"I had to, Frank. He—he's coming."

"Brashoff?"

She nodded nervously. "On his way to San Francisco."

"He told you that?" He took her elbow and led her gently toward the shadows of the cave; the moon was rising, sending its smoky light ahead.

She stopped in the entrance, leaning against the rock wall. "He wanted me to meet him there. Can you imagine that?"

"He wanted—" Soiled fingers circled the gun butt and gripped hard. "Did he say when?"

"Next week. But he's coming here first—tonight. Now. He told Storrs in the bar that he was taking one last look, and then he'd be back. Storrs was to wait for him."

"Did he?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. . .stop shaking, Frank. You're shaking."

He forced his shoulders straight and sucked in a huge breath to control his breathing. "It's what I expected." He eyed the brightening moon haze and frowned. "I didn't think—so soon, that's all. Evelyn, you've got to go. Go back. Right now. Take the footpath, don't go by Jarvis' place."

"Will you leave too?"

"Yes. Later. But go now. And Evelyn —thanks."

Their hands touched, their fingers ticked and sprang apart; and she started back the way she had come, and he listened long for her sound but that, too, was gone, and he heard only the faint whirr of the night breeze breathing through the trees.

THE moon rose above the mists and soaked the land with white light; down on the shoulder of the hill the shack lay plum-blue and still. One small sound came up from the trail, a sharp chucking noise. A hoof.

He hugged the ground of the cave entrance, gun drawn but uncocked; he lay with his face turned toward the shack, eyes half-closed to keep them from watering and blurring his sight. This time, he might have to shoot first; because if Brashoff saw him, Brashoff would kill without warning.

A flash-thought crossed his brain; he smiled at remembrance of the legend: the greenhorn will return someday and warn people about the murderer. The Indians used to say his ghost will rise from the pool. . . .

As simple as that. He glanced once at the pool, then turned back toward the shack. A hoof had sounded on the trail below, a horse's hoof; and so a rider was nearing the shack, dismounting by now, probably, and stealing through the trees like a shade. Brashoff, no doubt, taking one last look. . .Where was he going? San Francisco? So was the man in the cave, and he knew, as surely as he knew his hands, that only one of them would ever arrive.

A small shadow moved in the moonlight, then stopped. It melted into the tree-darkness beyond the shack, and the stillness was all around.

A coyote's howl floated through the moon mists and shimmered away on banshee echoes.

The man turned toward the pool.

The night was soundless now, the breeze had breathed its last. Yet something was. . .mists are silent, moonlight is silent. Still. . .the man tensed as he watched the smear of stars reflected in the pool. Something was thickening among them, was taking shape, was edging up the flat water; the moon brightness of the smooth surface was darkening to a rising shape.

The man levered back the hammer, breath in his chest, tongue dry; a clay-like, sticky feeling sensated his spine—the first skitter of fear.

The coyote's mournful warble sounded again, and the shape in the pool went still.

The man began talking to himself. . "Steady, Frank. . .Jarvis was a little gent . . .this thing's big. . .Jarvis didn't kill himself anyway. . .and you don't believe in ghosts either. . .do you?"

The shape was forming now, was moving again. Coming closer, quiet as thought.

The man had had warning enough. He felt behind him with noiseless boots and got a toe-grip in the sand; he pushed back with his hands and pulled with his legs and retreated, that way, from the mouth of the cave. He waited, once, and stared at the pool. The shape had formed to the huge likeness of a man, and it had come to the near-end of the pool.

The man in the cave strained backward,

gun held in his teeth by the trigger-guard; he rolled onto his back, sat up, and groped his way to the side of the cave. The shape was about to enter.

It was standing where he had been lying less than a minute before. It came in, smelling faintly of worn leather.

The man took the gun from his teeth and pressed a thumb hard down on the hammer to hold it at cock.

A yellow light speared the cave.

Brashoff played it in little circles, prying the end recesses where the rocks closed in. He walked halfway down and stabbed a boot into the sand. He drew a hand-axe and commenced chopping at the sand with strong, sure blows. He quit for a moment and searched in his shirt and pulled out a wide, flat canvas case. He placed it next to the light and started chopping again.

He suddenly stopped, hand-axe held over his head. He turned and glared across the light beam toward the entrance, head to one side, listening. Then he swung on his haunches, following with widening eyes the glim of the light on oiled boots. He snapped his huge body around and lashed out with the hand-axe.

THE man dove away from the crack of the axe and fired from the hip. He came to his knees and fired twice more, deaf to the blast of Brashoff's gun. Then he stumbled on the canvas case and tripped against the wall and felt a hard body thrust past him and saw wiry neck muscles twitch in the light of the lamp.

Storrs held his gun on Brashoff's body, blue barrel glinting. But he didn't fire. He didn't have to.

He slid his flint eyes sideward. "You hurt?"

"No." He got back on his feet and picked up the light and played it up and down Brashoff's body. "He doesn't feel anything either."

"Neither did old man Jarvis." Storrs holstered his gun and took the lamp. He squatted by the canvas case and ripped open the top-threading and forked out a palmful of glittering fragments of gold. He weighed them once, and put them back. He stood up. "You from the state?"

"No, federal. I work out of 'Frisco."

Storrs nodded. "Thought you might've quit the case, when you pulled out last week."

"You knew?"

"No-o." He stuck a cheroot in his mouth. "But that Evelyn girl ain't no fool, an' I hold she wouldn't cotton to a gent who was crooked." He lighted the cheroot and dropped the match on Brashoff's back. "Besides, the Queen ain't solvent."

"I figured that."

"He bought in last year, an' right away commenced to turn things his way. Percentages on stock sales, things like that." Storrs exhaled thoughtfully. "I pitched it to the owners, an' they proclaimed the comin' of an accountant. So the good sheriff, here, had to balance the books."

The man rubbed his beard bristle, fingered his jaw, and tried not to yawn. He was tired, but the nerve-drag was gone and he felt better. "I watched him all I could. Know where he had the assays?"

"I figgered around the shack, somewheres."

"Right under where Jarvis had buried them. He came out today and dug 'em up."

They walked out of the cave, and Storrs snapped off the lamp in the moonlight and handed over the case. "Guess this is yours."

"'Til I can get it to San Francisco." He gazed at Storrs. "Was that you down by the shack tonight?"

"Yuh." Cheroot smoke plumed out. "He told me to wait in the bar fer him, but I follered him. Thought he'd hit fer the shack, but he come right to the cave instead. What'd you do—ambush him?"

The man shook his head. "He damned near walked onto me, while I was watching you. But his reflection"—he paused and smiled—"well, the greenhorn returned. . . ."

He met Evelyn in the hall by the desk, and all the questions in her eyes reflected all the answers in his. He took her hands and said, "I'm going to San Francisco, like I said. But I'll be back—someday soon."

"Will you?"

"All greenhorns return. . . . Maybe you'll be here when I do."

"I think I will," she said.

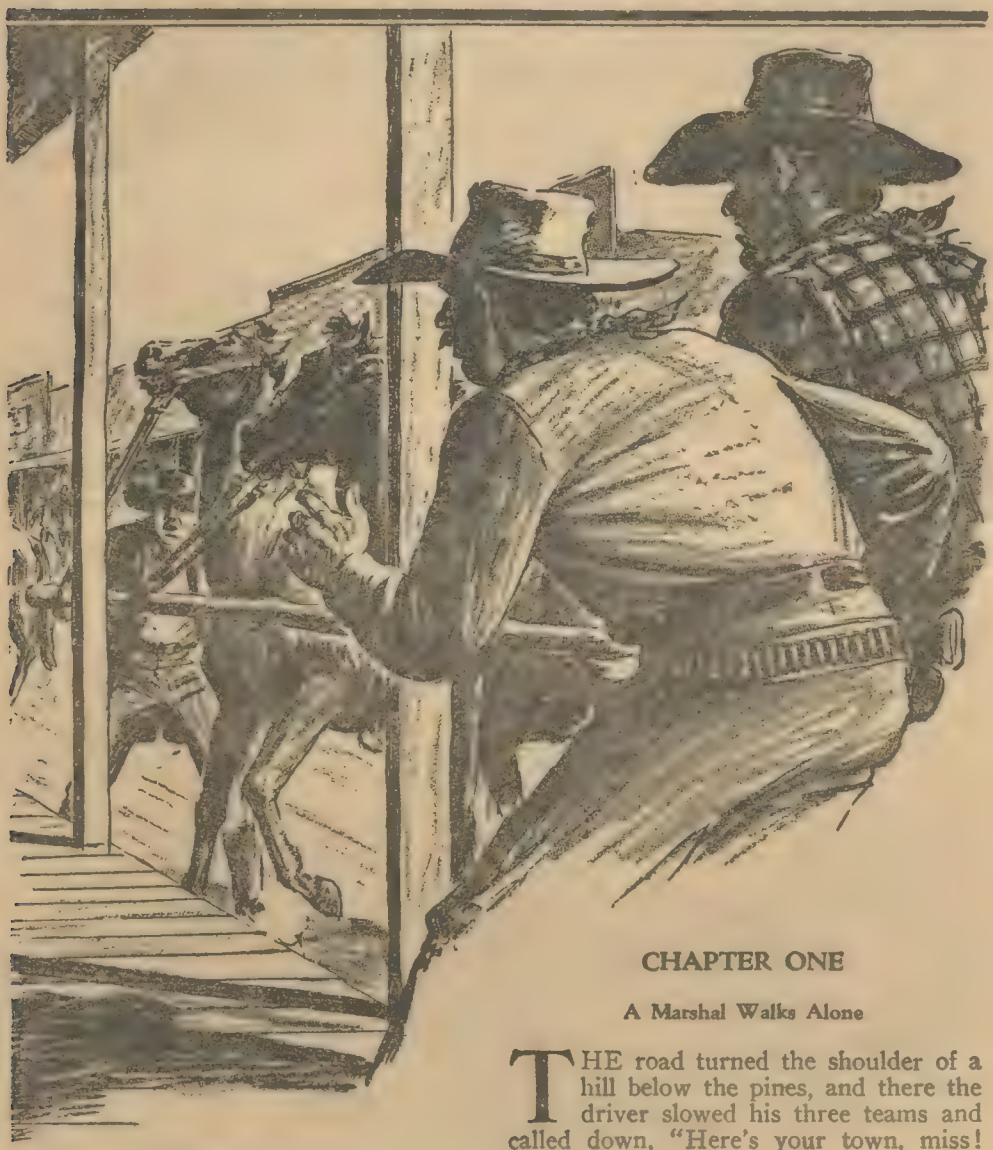
IT'S YOUR TOWN—DIE IN IT!

Reber saw the flame lick out at him

Thrilling Border Novelette

By PETER DAWSON

Marshal Fred Reber, orneriest lawman west of Dodge, had to learn the hard way that it takes more than iron-hard honesty to live out a peaceful life—on the fertile soil that covered his victims' bones. . . .



Murdock and his pardner stared, transfixed

CHAPTER ONE

A Marshal Walks Alone

THE road turned the shoulder of a hill below the pines, and there the driver slowed his three teams and called down, "Here's your town, miss! Alder Creek."

Faith Ames moved quickly to the open window of the coach and saw the settlement lying close below, that first glimpse bringing not only surprise but the odd impression that she was coming home.

And she thought delightedly, I'm going to like it, after all!

This was spring, and she was looking down on a wide street shaded at either end by the light emerald of cottonwoods in new leaf. Between the trees ran a double rank of stores, late morning's strong sunlight bringing out the detail of their uneven shoulder-to-shoulder false fronts. The blue woodsmoke of breakfast fires still lightly shrouded all that downward crotch of the valley and the slender spire of a church, newly-shingled, rose cleanly through the haze.

She hadn't expected the town to have such a trim and prosperous look. Now her last doubts were gone. Instead of dreading this new life she had so hesitantly decided upon, she found herself looking forward to it. And as the coach rolled on, the crest of a rise presently cutting off her view, she sank back against the hard cushion, realizing that after all she wasn't so tired from the long journey.

The squeal of brake-blocks and a swaying of the coach against its thoroughbraces laid a sudden and discordant note against the pleasing harmony of her anticipation. She heard the driver cursing his teams and, curious, put a hand to the small blue hat topping her high-gathered chestnut ringlets and leaned far enough out the window to see ahead.

A tall man stood beside the road. He carried a rifle, muzzle down, in one hand, and a mail sack in the other, and now as the Concord swayed to a stop his gray eyes took in Faith with a cursory glance that seemed at once to dismiss her. Then the slow smile that broke the clean angles of his face as he looked up at the driver was at odds with the Winchester. So was his drawl.

"Far as you go, Barney," he said. "No passengers. And here's your mail." Effortlessly, he tossed the sack to the Concord's roof, adding, "You're to go 'round by way of the mill road and pick up your relays at Benson's. He'll take your mail, too."

"Just what the hell is this,Reber?" For the first time over these sixty miles, Faith found the driver awed.

"The bids, Barney. There in the sack. Saul Grant's got his bunch on the street to see they don't go off. If you shake a leg you'll be gone before he knows you have 'em."

Barney's low whistle was eloquent of surprise or alarm, Faith couldn't decide which. "But I got a passenger to set down here."

"He'll have to walk the rest of the way."

"She. It's a woman."

Once again this tall man's glance came around to Faith. He touched his wide hat politely and sauntered in on the door to open it. "Sorry, miss," he said, "but you'll have to get down here. There's trouble below and Barney's going 'round the town."

He held out his free hand, and the move laid his coat open to let Faith see the shield pinned to the pocket of his flannel shirt. When she made no move, he spoke again. "You can wait up here if you like and I'll send a rig for you."

His politeness gave her no grounds for protesting, so she took his hand and let him help her down off the high step and out of the now empty coach. She was no sooner standing beside him than he shut the door and called, "On your way, Barney. The longer you hang around the less your chances."

THE driver was lifting Faith's valise from the front boot. "This is hers," he said, scowling. "Suppose they stop me?" he asked. Then, instead of handing down the valise, he dropped it.

"Your lookout." Reber caught the valise easily, though Faith remembered it had scaled at forty-two pounds back at the railroad. She was eyeing him wonderingly as he added, "But they won't. Robbin' the mails is a federal offense."

Barney booted off his brake and unwound the long lash of his whip as Reber was saying, "You'll be taking me out on your way back through this afternoon."

"How come?"

"I'm leaving."

"You ain't been here but two weeks. Leavin' for where?"

Reber's wide shoulders lifted, fell. "Anywhere but here."

"What'll they do for a marshal?"

"Rope the next sucker they can wish the job onto."

Barney swung his whip now so that it

cracked like a gunshot between the heads of the leaders. "Sucker's right!" he said tartly as the coach lurched into motion.

Reber stood there watching the Concord roll away and shortly turn off the main road along some weed-grown ruts a hundred yards farther on. And Faith, having this chance to study him, discovered he was even taller than she had supposed. Because he was the bearer of news that disturbed her, she was contrarily determined not to like him. His hair needed cutting, she decided. It was pale hair, the color of oat straw, and it showed below the back of his hat in a mallard's-tail curl. Despite his show of that rawhide strength, and a certain economy of motion she had noticed each time he moved, she chose now to think him ungainly and awkward.

Then, too, his speech had been cocksure, too amused to suit the situation, and it was this that made her say now, "You seem to be taking it all very calmly."

The faintly startled way he looked around irritated her further, for it meant he had all but forgotten she was standing there—and that was contrary to a man's usual behavior around her. Reber's next words, "There's nothin' to work up a head of steam over. Besides, it's done now," didn't improve her frame of mind.

He picked up the valise and nodded toward a tangle of scrub-oak growing up the slope that hid the town. "You can wait here in the shade," he told her. "It won't be more than a quarter hour."

She said at once, "I'm quite able to walk that far."

"Fine." He was smiling again and, try as she would, she could this time find nothing about the smile to dislike.

They started down the road, Reber carrying the valise and rifle. The man and woman were silent as they followed the wheel ruts, Reber only sauntering to keep pace with her. Presently they rounded the hill and were looking down on the town again, and Faith was finding it far different from what it had seemed minutes ago. It was pretty much the same as countless other grubby, dreary settlements of this country. She knew exactly why it looked this way to her now and in understanding her unwanted depression knew also that she had been unfair in her judgment of this stranger. She didn't like to be unfair.

What she thought of Reber mattered little one way or the other. Yet she had to get to the core of her strange new uneasiness so she asked bluntly, "What sort of trouble are you having?"

"Me?" He looked down with faint amusement. "Not much now. Got rid of it when I handed Barney that mail."

She was impatient with his answer and showed it as she asked coolly. "Then what sort of trouble is the town having?"

"The usual." He shrugged. "A man throwin' his weight around."

"How?"

"The government's opened some good range along the flats for sale on bids. Saul Grant has used it so long he thinks it's his."

She was remembering what he had said to Barney. "And he . . . this Grant, tried to stop the bids going out?"

Reber chuckled. "That he did. Only I was up at four in the morning and got the postmaster to seal 'em in a separate sack. Now Grant's down there with his crew and a chip on his shoulder, waitin' for the stage. It you look real hard you can see him on the hotel porch."

Faith looked. But there were three men on the broad veranda of the building she took to be the hotel, and she didn't care particularly which of them might be Saul Grant. There was something she had to know, something so personal in what Reber was saying that she was almost afraid as she asked, "So now the trouble's over?"

"You think so? You don't know Saul Grant."

HIS answer gave her a stricken feeling and, that depression settling even deeper in her, she was silent all the way down the road and into the head of the street. The shade under the cottonwoods seemed chill, clammy almost, and she was glad when they finally walked out into the sunlight again and left the dirt path to go along a plank walk fronting the first few stores.

Shortly, passing one of these, Faith saw something in the window that made her stop short. It was a beautifully crocheted square of lace in a gilt frame that lay propped against a swirl of blue velveteen

yard goods. The design of the lace spelled out in delicate tracery: *Anne Baker, Seamstress, 1854.*

Reber had stopped and was eyeing her. He glanced in the window. "Make a good-looking dress, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would."

"Eighteen fifty-four," he drawled. "Means she's been at it a long time. At least twenty-nine years. No wonder they say she's too old for the close work." He frowned, looking obliquely down at Faith. "If you're havin' a new dress made, better wait till the new girl comes."

"The new girl?"

He nodded. "Miss Anne's sent for someone to take over the shop, they say. She must think it's time to take a rest."

Faith was confused, not wanting to talk about this any longer, and as she led the way on up the walk she said the first thing that came to mind. "They'll know now what you've done, won't they? Hadn't you better let me carry my things the rest of the way?"

"It's no bother." Even though his tone was casual she saw his glance moving restlessly over the street now, that good-humored look gone from his eyes . . . "They won't try anything so long as I'm with you."

But as they walked on she knew he was only trying to save her feelings. For she could see a definite pattern of trouble shaping itself and it brought her no satisfaction to realize how certainly she recognized it. That man up ahead who had been untying a team from one of the hitch rails, for instance, didn't drop his reins and hastily cross the walk to disappear inside a store simply because of a forgotten errand. He had seen Reber.

So had others. There was one in particular. He was across the street, and a moment after Faith noticed him he straightened from his idle leaning against the post of a walk awning to hurl a half-smoked cigar into the dust and then hook thumbs from a shell belt sagging at his waist. There had been an unmistakable belligerence in his gesture and now his stance was openly defiant. She was all at once afraid for Reber and looked quickly up at him, about to speak.

There was no need of it. He was watching the man and now slowed his stride a little and rocked the muzzle of the rifle in a spare gesture packed with meaning. For several seconds all that stood between midday's drowsy somnolence and the sudden outbreak of violence was the coolness and sureness of Reber's glance.

That glance finally carried its weight. The man across there lowered his hands and turned deliberately away up the walk. Faith found herself trembling. It had been a near thing, regardless of her being with Reber, and now she said in a hushed voice, "He was one of them?"

"John Murdock, Saul Grant's right bower."

His attention was elsewhere, the impassiveness of his lean face breaking before that faint smile she was coming to know so well. And by the time she glanced ahead she saw he was looking at a spare-built man in faded denims standing on a doorstep nearly abreast of them.

Reber spoke to this man. "Go on home and let Nora see you, Ed. She'll be worried."

"How can I? They got both walks covered." The stark fear showing in Ed's eyes made Faith look quickly away.

"Then take the alley."

Reber had hesitated but now continued on, saving the man what humiliation he could.

"The bids, Fred?" asked the man as they left him.

"On their way," Reber answered.

The hotel was two buildings beyond now and as they neared it Faith saw that Reber couldn't yet relax his vigilance. For a burly man almost as tall as Reber rose from a chair by the railing, his angry dark eyes fixed on Reber. She knew this must be Saul Grant.

They were climbing the steps when he said flatly, harshly. "Reber, I want to see you."

"In a minute."

Reber's sureness was a thing hardly to be believed. He ignored Grant completely, even turning his back as he opened the screen door for Faith. He was beside her all the way across the gloom of the lobby to the counter at the foot of the stairs. As he set her valise down and looked to the front of the room there wasn't the slightest trace of excitement in his tone when he said, "Customer, Clint."

CHAPTER TWO

Needed—One Tough Lawman

ONLY then did Faith notice a graying, stopped figure at one of the veranda windows. And as the oldster started toward them she spoke softly to Reber, not wanting to be overheard: "What will happen now?"

"Anyone's guess." He touched the curled brim of his hat. "Well, I won't be seeing you again, miss. Good-by."

He turned away and she realized he had put her wholly from his thoughts before she found the voice to say, "Thank you for what you've done."

She expected no answer and got none, and that slight breach of courtesy was his only betrayal of the tightness of his nerves as he left the lobby, closing the door behind him. On the heel of that sound the old clerk said quickly, "Mind waitin' a second, miss?" The clerk was already on his way back to the window.

As the seconds dragged on, Faith wished the clock on the wall over the desk would stop ticking so loudly. For she was trying to read the muffled sounds coming from the street. Once she thought she heard the smooth tenor of Reber's drawl and, watching the oldster at the window, found it hard to resist the urge to join him.

After an interminable wait she saw him stiffen suddenly, then a moment later breathe softly, "Ah-h!" He smacked one open palm with his other fist, and his hawkish face wore a broad smile as he turned from the window. Then he was thinking aloud, telling her exactly what she wanted to know: "Beats anything I ever seen! Didn't say a thing, either. Wonder what made that ornery cuss of a Saul back down? He's got snow melt in his veins, that one!"

He came in behind his counter and glanced at the keyboard below the clock. "Now, miss," he said, "we got a front corner room for a dollar that's real nice." He noticed her confusion then and, misreading it, added, "Or there's a couple at the back you could look at."

"No, it's not that," Faith told him hastily.

She was finding it hard to put her mind to her problem. And, shortly, when she could think she was too confused to decide anything definitely. "Could I leave my things with you until I've made a call?" she finally asked. "I'm not . . . not at all sure I'm staying."

"Sure thing," he said, and came out to get her valise and take it in alongside his desk.

As she turned away, slowly crossing the lobby to the window where he'd been standing, she was thankful he wasn't curious. She would have resented anyone questioning her present state of mind. Now as she glanced out across the street the only remotely pleasurable emotion in her died slowly as she failed to see Reber anywhere. Though he was the immediate reason for her present state of mind, she was honest enough to admit that there were qualities in him that strongly attracted her. She had never before encountered a man with exactly the quiet, unobtrusive strength of character he had so far shown her, though the fact of his being a peace officer, a breed of man she little respected, was at odds with her judgment of him.

Slowly, as she stood there, her thoughts went to far-away things and became less disturbed than they had been. She was vaguely aware of the clatter of dishes and silverware, along with the low mutter of voices, coming from a room leading off the lobby and realized that she should be hungry since she had left the train to board the stage before dawn. But she could summon no appetite. A bell somewhere down the street slowly tolled the noon hour and several men entered the lobby and disappeared into the dining room, and the girl no longer felt so much alone.

Finally she understood that no amount of thinking, of rationalizing, would alter certain facts that weighed so heavily in the matter she was considering. And, knowing that, she was all at once impatient to finish the thing she had decided upon, distasteful, as it might be. This girl had enough courage for two.

So she went out and back up the street the way she had come with Reber. And when she presently left the walk it was to turn in at the door of Anne Baker's dress shop.

THAT winds it up, Reber had said to himself as he watched Saul Grant and Murdock and a third man swing astride their horses. They had ridden out of the street without so much as a backward glance. His bluff there on the hotel veranda, of leaning his carbine against the rail and then suddenly wheeling on Grant, had carried. No word had been spoken. But his invitation had been plain enough and it still surprised him to realize that Grant had backed down in front of all those witnesses and walked away.

The man hadn't taken up his challenge simply because he was the one unproven ingredient in this explosive circumstance. Grant would bide his time probably, Reber was thinking. But sooner or later if he stayed on—tomorrow or the day after or next week—his reprieve would run its time and he would have to face someone with a gun and be ready to kill. Unless, of course, he could so thoroughly cow Grant and his crew as to convince the man he had everything to lose and nothing to gain.

He was having none of it.

So he was thinking as he stepped into the shack that served as the town marshal's office to find portly Sam Henderson eased back in the swivel chair at the desk. And so he stated to Henderson, without preliminary, bluntly and with no doubt in his eye.

"Mayor, you need a new man. As of now." He pulled his coat aside, unpinned the marshal's shield and tossed it to Henderson's ample lap.

Alder Creek's mayor didn't even look down at the badge. He rolled his cigar into one cheek and for a moment eyed Reber enigmatically, his glance showing neither reproof nor agreement. "You have my thanks, Fred," he said finally, "for helping us this far along. I admire the way you handled that."

Reber stepped to the window and sat on the sill, his long frame slouched in that way he had of always putting himself at his physical ease. "Look," he said with an attempt at patience. "I come in here and take this job on Ed Folds' say-so. Easy money and nothin' to it but locking up a drunk now and then, so they said. Like hell! I'm handlin' something that'll burn quicker than a hot iron. So I'm getting out. You folks can pull your own fat out of the fire. You don't need me around."

Henderson nodded slowly. "Ed too."

"Ed, too," Reber echoed tonelessly. "He's just a man I sided two winters ago on a grub line down in Custer County. I don't set myself up as a target for anyone."

"I wish you'd stay, Fred. You're the only man we've ever seen around here that can handle Saul."

"How do you know I can handle him?" There was an edge of real anger in Reber's voice now. He slapped the scabbard where the horn-handled .44 rode at his thigh. "How do you know I can even shoot this thing?"

"I don't. But I'd bet my last dollar you can. So would Saul Grant. That's what counts."

Reber shook his head, easing erect. "It's no dice. I'm buying a ticket out on the stage at two."

Henderson took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, audibly. "What does Ed Folds do now that you're pulling out on him? You and Ed were partners on that bid."

"If the bid's high and if Ed's alive—if, I say—I'll send him my share of the money."

Henderson lifted his bulk out of the chair tiredly, and without looking at Reber went to the door. "So long," he said as he left, and Reber didn't bother to say anything.

There wasn't much in the office that was his, so it took Reber less than a minute to go through the desk drawer and gather up his belongings. He took off his neckpiece, rolled his things in it and, not looking back as he went out, turned the key in the door and hung it on the nail inside the screen where half the town knew it could always be found.

ON HIS way to the hotel he noticed three horses drowsing at the rail before the Gold Eagle, the same three animals Grant and his men had ridden down the street a short time ago. But the sight of them stirred only faint interest, so definitely had he put the troubles of this town from his mind. At the hotel he went straight to his room to pack his war-bag. And once again, on leaving a place he had frequented such a good share of the time

since coming here, there was lacking any strong tie to urge him to take a final look around. He went straight down to the lobby, dropped his war-bag and sacked saddle at the foot of the stairs and went on into the dining room to eat.

He had nearly finished the meal when he noticed Doc Samuels standing in the lobby doorway. The medico scanned the room, saw him and came straight across to his table. Putting his hat and black satchel aside, Samuels leaned on the chair opposite as he said gravely, "Nora Folds sent me. She heard you were leaving and wanted you to know about Ed."

"What about him?"

The doctor's glance fell away but a moment later came back to Reber again. "He's going to live," he said quietly. Then, at Reber's startled look, he frowned. "I thought you knew, Marshal."

"Go on. What happened?"

"Saul Grant gave him a beating. Broke into the house with Murdock and another man while Ed and Nora were eating. One of them held Nora and the other pinned Ed's arms behind him. Then Saul went to work. . . . " He shook his head " . . . There was blood all over the kitchen. Ed's lower jaw is fractured and—"

"Nora saw it all?" Reber cut in harshly.

"How could she help it?"

Something in Reber's tone had warned Samuels that he had said enough. He knew Reber but slightly and now straightened and picked up his things. "He'll be all right," he said awkwardly. "Just a matter of time."

"Much obliged for letting me know."

Reber was staring down at the clean-scrubbed boards of the table as the doctor disappeared into the lobby, and he was thinking, This happened to Ed because of me. But then his common sense told him he was mistaken. Regardless of his being here Ed would have put in his bid on the government land. And, also regardless of his having come to Alder Creek, Ed could have expected just such a thing as this as the outcome of having defied Saul Grant. So what had happened to Ed had nothing to do with his, Reber's, plans or even with the outcome of his encounter with Grant this morning.

The last of his coffee tasted bitter as he drank it and he was in an unaccountable hurry to leave the table, though there was time to spare before the stage was due. He sauntered on into the lobby, rolling up a smoke and wishing the next half hour was gone and he could be on his way out.

There was a musty, closed-in smell to the air in the lobby, and, with a glance at the clock that told him he had forty minutes to wait, he pushed open the screen door and went out onto the veranda. He wondered about going on out to see Ed but discarded the notion when he realized how such a visit might weaken his resolve. He could no more afford to let sentiment sway him now than he could have afforded to waste words on Grant this morning. This was a clear-cut decision he had made.

When he finally saw the girl he had taken off the stage sitting there in the end veranda rocker, he realized he must have been staring at her for several seconds. She was studying him gravely, with an odd tilt of the head that to his way of thinking made her quite beautiful. And now it struck him that in his preoccupation with other things this morning he had missed seeing how attractive she was.

CHAPTER THREE

The Trail Out

HE SAW HER coat hanging from the back of the chair then. Her valise was sitting behind the chair. She still wore the blue hat and abruptly he knew that she must be waiting for the stage the same as he was. And along with his surprise this prospect of enjoying her company over the ride out to the railroad stirred in him the first pleasing emotion the day had brought.

"You can't be on your way out so soon," he said as he came up to her.

"Yes, I'm afraid I am." She fixed him with that same odd, probing glance of a moment ago. "They say you're leaving, too."

He leaned back against the railing, smiling good-naturedly as he drawled, "The word gets around." He saw that he hadn't lit his smoke and now reached for a match, thumbing it alight as he added,

"I figured that you were here to stay."

"I was. Until a few minutes ago."

Her seriousness sobered him. "Anything you can tell me about?" he asked as he flicked the match out over the walk.

She was silent a long moment, her glance seeming to go through him. Finally she raised the fingers of one gloved hand from the chair arm, then let them fall again. "Yes, I can tell you. I'm the new girl Miss Anne's been expecting."

Surprise opened his eyes wider. "And you're not staying? Why?"

"It's the town, Mr. Reber." She had been trying to remember his given name but couldn't.

"What's wrong with the town? They don't come any better."

"You've found something wrong with it."

"Sure." His laugh sounded a trifle forced to him. "I'm getting out before they lift my scalp. But you . . . Miss Anne's been counting on you. You're giving up a sure thing."

Her straightforward regard of him hadn't diminished and now she murmured, more to herself than to him, it seemed, "You're not afraid. Yet you're leaving because of it." Her words gave him nothing he could fasten onto, and shortly she went on, "Yes, I'm giving up a good thing."

"For any particular reason?"

"It's the town, I said. It's driving us both out."

"What is?" His puzzlement lasted only a moment before he asked, "You mean this trouble Grant's stirred up?"

"Yes. That's why you're leaving, isn't it?"

"What's that got to do with a woman?" he countered. "Here you are, come all this way for nothing. You mean to say you're leaving because—"

When he hesitated, she finished for him. "Because a man with a chip on his shoulder is daring someone to knock it off. It always starts that way."

"How could you know?" he asked, sensing that her conviction was far more deeply rooted than her words had so far conveyed.

"How can I know? Because I've seen this kind of trouble before. Only the people and the look of the country are different from that other time. The rest is the same . . . the talk, the . . . the threats and the being afraid. The shooting will come later, after I'm gone." He was amazed now to see her eyes bright with fury as she went on in a hushed voice, "They killed my father, Mr. Reber! Killed him with a shotgun. At night, when he was alone. He had no part in their quarrel. They just mistook him for someone else."

There was nothing he could say, and over the brief silence he saw that outward sign of her anger die away. "So I'll not go through that again," she told him. "The guilty ones never seem to pay the price the innocent do. There must be places . . . civilized places, where a person can live in peace. I made the mistake of thinking this was to be one. But it isn't a peaceful town."

"It is!" He was staring down at the veranda floor as he voiced those stubborn words. Now his glance lifted and met hers once more and when he spoke again it was angrily, as though he found something personal in her indictment of Alder Creek. "You'll never find a nicer place. Folks are friendly, real neighbors. This'll all blow over. Someone's going to whittle Saul Grant down to size."

She shook her head. "I doubt it. A few may try to go against him. And maybe one or two will die before he has his way. But he'll have it in the end. After that this country will be under a shadow. Have you ever lived under that kind of a shadow?"

When he didn't speak at once, she said, "I've lived under it for years. Then this past winter I found I was free. The last of my family was gone. I could get away. So I chose this place when I heard Miss Anne needed someone. Now I find exactly what I tried to leave behind me. Think of it! Of . . . well, of marrying and raising children under that same shadow. Think of having to tell the children they must nod politely to your Mr. Grant each time they meet him, in fear of what he might be able to do to their father if they didn't. Or of having to worship in the same church with him each Sunday, knowing he was a murderer."

"But I tell you they'll get Grant in the end."

SHE SMILED distantly, in a way that seemed to indicate an understanding far deeper than his. "Miss Anne said that. She said people were praying someone would shoot him. She . . . she cried when I wouldn't listen. She really does need someone. She even spoke of you, for she'd heard what happened here this morning. She said people were counting on you, that they believed in you."

"This is their affair," he said defensively, "not mine. I'm just as much a stranger to the town as you are. But you're wrong in leaving. Dead wrong."

She nodded in a detached way and he noticed that a thin shaft of sunlight, reflected from a window opposite, placed about her head an aura of finespun copper. "You may be right," she murmured. "But we'll not know until it's too late."

He was mulling it over in his mind, groping for a further argument, when she looked past him along the street and then straightened in her chair, saying, "Here comes the stage."

He was disappointed with himself, that feeling of inadequacy strong in him as he looked on out to see the high Concord, Barney perched on its roof, rolling in past the feed mill with the dust streaming like water from its wheel rims. Idly, still trying to think of a way of persuading this girl to stay, he watched Barney expertly threading his three teams through the maze of the street's traffic.

It was a principle of Barney's never to slow his teams until the last moment, and then only with the help of brake-locked wheels. Ordinarily Reber would have enjoyed watching this exhibition of such precise skill. But now he was resenting Barney's display, for the girl was rising from her chair to signal that their talk was at an end.

Nothing had been settled, nothing seemed right to Reber now. He walked beside Faith as far as the steps. Clint came out the door with her valise, robbing him of the opportunity of offering to get it for her and also reminding him of his own luggage. So he did what he could to salvage the debris of that pleasant quality in their relationship, telling her, "Take the seat that faces front. It's easier on the stomach. Be with you in a minute." And he went on into the lobby.

By the time he was back again and going down the steps, Red Semple was there with the relay horses and he and Barney were unharnessing the jaded animals. Pausing on the walk, Reber saw that the girl had taken the frontward-facing seat, as he had suggested. But men passengers sat to either side of her to fill the seat.

Nothing's worked out right, not one damn' thing! he thought.

He was leaving Alder Creek with a bad taste in his mouth. What the girl had said added to the self-loathing he felt each time he remembered Ed and Nora Folds. So Miss Anne thought people were counting on him, did she, that folks believed in him? Why would she or anyone else think him fool enough to horn into their affairs and risk his neck? Why?

Quite suddenly the answers came. They were plain, no longer to be contradicted despite his wish not to recognize them. Then, unaccountably, he was a different man.

He felt fine. Better, almost, than he'd ever felt. Every one of his doubts were gone. They left him as easily, as quickly as the dust of a day's ride might be washed off with good strong soap. He knew what he was going to do now. It was the only thing he could do.

He sauntered on over and heaved his saddle and war-bag to the coach's roof. "Don't leave without me, Barney," he said, and his tone was light-hearted, almost amused. "Be back in five minutes."

"Make it three," Barney told him as he turned down the walk.

Reber scarcely heard. He was seeing those three horses of Saul Grant's still tied to the rail in front of the Gold Eagle. He was also trying to look ahead and picture exactly what he was to do this next minute. Then shortly, and with a finality backed by nothing but a belief in his luck, the thought struck him, Lay off the worry, Reber.

He was even with the narrow passageway that flanked the saloon when the batwing doors swung outward and Saul Grant's solid shape moved out onto the walk. Murdock followed Grant closely, the third man beside him. Grant was saying something to them when he saw Reber and went silent. He stopped so

quickly that Murdock shouldered into him and stumbled.

Reber's stride slowed, came to a halt. Had he placed them exactly as he wanted they would have been like this. They were less than twenty feet away and so grouped that he could cover all three.

BEYOND THEM he noticed two men who had been coming along the walk hastily leave it and cut out over the street. Then he was saying tonelessly, "They tell me you boys paid a call on Ed Folds."

He said softly, deliberately, "Now what're you goin' to do, Saul?" And, speaking, he lifted his right hand to the scabbard hanging at his thigh.

Grant's eyes opened wide. "You don't crowd me into any play, Reber!"

Murdock and the other man hadn't moved and now a mirthless smile touched Reber's face. "Where's all that hell you had in you when you worked Ed over?"

He walked straight in on Grant then and swung his left hand sharply in a vicious open-handed blow that rocked the man's solid frame back a step. A livid patch showed against the paleness of Grant's face. And as he stood there, too afraid to move or speak. A trickle of blood ran from one corner of his mouth and he licked it away.

From the street came an interruption then. Someone called, "Need any help, Reber?"

It was Sam Henderson who had spoken and now, without turning, Reber drawled, "Help with what? There's no fight in him."

He hit Grant so quickly then that afterward he realized the man probably never saw the blow coming. It was a long hard uppercut, backed by all the weight of his heavy shoulders. It caught Saul Grant full at the side of the jaw and threw him back against the saloon's window. His knees buckled and as he went down the glass of the window's lower sash came down with him.

Grant sat there staring up in a dazed, hurt way. His jaw hung loose, as though he couldn't shut it. Both Murdock and the other man had stepped well aside now.

Reber said, "That'll do for now, Saul. But there'll be more." Then, as he had once before today, he turned his back on Saul Grant and started away from him.

He knew what he was doing. He was doing it deliberately. He knew, too, that the timing of his move was what counted.

So now as he took his third step he lunged aside, reaching to the Colt's at his thigh even as Sam Henderson's bellowed "Reber!" sounded from the street.

His glance beat his upswinging .44 to target Saul Grant. The man's weapon was out and lined. Reber saw it swing a trifle to track to his sudden move. Reber saw the flame lick out at him.

He felt nothing but the feather-soft concussion of that explosion and, the next instant, the pound of the Colt's against his hand. He saw his bullet strike. He turned away.

Murdock's awed look broke slightly as his hands lifted. The other man, evidently unharmed, simply stared.

"You two can be across the town line before dark if you hurry," Reber told them, sheathing the Colt.

There were others gathering close by on the walk now and Reber was making his way past them when someone touched him on the shoulder and he turned to see Sam Henderson alongside him.

"What now, Reber?" Henderson asked with the utmost gravity. "Do you stay?"

"Tell you later." Reber went on.

Barney was already on his seat atop the coach and the way he watched Reber approaching was a rare thing. And when Reber came in below him, he asked, "Want to set up here a spell, Marshal?"

Reber shook his head. "You're not goin' to like this, Barney. You'll have to unload that stuff of mine."

"What the hell for?"

"I'm staying."

Reber was looking in at Faith as he said this last. The expression of wonderment and outright happiness in her eyes made a whole man of him again.

He wanted her to understand what he was doing and he told her, "It's all right now. For you, too." Then he opened the door and held it for her.

There was a good chance that Barney would grumble about it, he was thinking as he handed Alder Creek's new seamstress down out of the coach.

THE END

Anthony Rushton

In 1851, after twelve years of scouting and Indian taming, Tony Rushton joined the gold rush in Hangtown, California. Soon figuring there was more money to be taken out of miners than out of mining, he opened up a hardware store. Doing a boom business in picks, shovels and wheelbarrows, his growing bank roll quickly demonstrated that his figuring was correct.

Leaving the store late one night, he saw two men breaking into the darkened Wells Fargo office. Re-entering his store, he seized a shotgun and a handful of cartridges. Running to the stage office, he called on the men, who were now inside, to surrender. Realizing they couldn't buck buckshot in a 12×12 room, they wisely obeyed.

In 1855, Hangtown hoodlums planned to wipe out all the Chinamen in the diggings en masse. They murdered several, but Rushton gathered 30 or 40 terrified Celestials into his store, stood off the mob and shot three of its leaders. Finally the decent element in town rallied together, and after a terrific free-for-all, dispersed the trouble makers.

When the road entering Hangtown was washed out by flood waters, Tony rescued the marooned Sacramento stage coach passengers. Several times he swam the raging torrent and brought the half drowned passengers and the driver to safety. Rushton later sold his store, and played a prominent part in opening up the rich San Joaquin Valley to settlers. He died in 1888.

Joab Hale, turncoat nugget-hunter, fought a one-man war for the right to live, until at last the two-bit ranchers of Miller's Valley rallied to his rebel banner against the encroaching land-greedy legion. . . . . At the very moment when the girl he loved was hostage in the enemy stronghold —and Hale's own neck was hostage in the enemy's hangnoose!

Smashing Frontier Novel

By

E. HOFFMAN PRICE

A COWMAN DAMNS HIS BRAND

It was a deft cast which bound Hale's arms . . . before he had a chance of going for his gun

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Hung Pocket Hunter

ASIDE from Joab Hale, not a man in Miller's Valley had any prospects to justify the contented look of one whose four aces had raked in the pot; and Hale had precisely such a look as he reined in at the ranchhouse. Whereas all the others had come to the valley to win, he had come to lose. In his eyes was the expression of eagerly seeking what lay beyond the horizon: he carried his head forward a little, as if to hasten the sight of what was beyond the next ridge. Then he remembered that to fool Jane Fraler he'd have to be convincing, so he banished the quirk of amusement which from time to time loosened his mouth, and his long, lean face.

When he dismounted he spent a moment considering the neat Rafter JH freshly branded on his horse's shoulder. Next he sized up the ranchhouse. It wore what remained of a coat of paint, showing that the spread he'd bought had in its day paid even for luxuries. Tall poplars shaded it, as well as the barn and store room and bunkhouse. Finally he turned to Bob Durley, the lantern jawed foreman who, up until this moment, had been showing him around. Now it was for Hale to give orders, and Durley to take them.

Except for a bulge of Battle Axe, Durley's cheeks were sunken. His deeply lined face was sombre. Overhanging brows shaded small sharp eyes. For the life of him, Hale could not decide whether Dur-

ley was for him, against him, or didn't give a hoot either way.

"Bob, you figure we'd be wasting time, making a tally?"

"Take the book count and divide by two. Couldn't tell you that before you bought."

"You could not," Hale agreed. "Until I'd done bought, you worked for another man."

Lem Weaver had warned him, and the valley itself had warned Joab Hale: despite rich grazing and lots of water, cattlemen were hauling out. Whether they sold and broke even, or fought the big Eldorado Land & Cattle Company until they were flattened, it made no difference. Each in his turn left because he had to. And this was what Hale wanted: to fail reasonably soon, after a reasonably brave struggle, to cure Jane Fraler of her notion that owning a spread was better than being what Hale called a "pocket hunter."

A pocket hunter is a special sort of prospector with an instinct for smelling out nuggets. After cleaning up, he'd sell his claim, to let someone else have the work, the sweat, and the possible loss. A pocket hunter, after gutting the place to which his hunch had directed him, got out with his winnings. That was what Hale intended; and in this case, Jane was the treasure.

Funny thing, Jane had not objected when he told her he'd buy in the valley. Being a schoolmarm, and boarding with the Lem Weavers, there was little she didn't know about the wire cutting and rustling and the tailor-made stampedes which bit by bit broke the will and the heart of the men who had settled the valley, long before the Eldorado outfit had come to the territory to hog it with scrip and fake homesteading as a start.

So with Jane liking my choice, I'll be a cattle baron here, where the misery'll end quickest, he repeated to himself, and then said to Durley, "Divide the book by two, and start working for me."

WHEN they mounted up, nevertheless, for a pasear, Durley began to talk about stretches of creek bottom which were fenced to keep the critters out of bad quicksands. Hale, looking and listening, finally asked, "How come you let 'em get salt hungry? You knew better than that."

Durley gave him a quizzical look, as if to say, Not quite the tenderfoot I figured you for, and answered, "It's been right hard to get, and the old man was aiming to sell out anyway."

Later, riding the eastern boundary, Hale remarked, "That fence's caught hell. Your old boss must've rather fixed it than watched it."

"You didn't ask him."

"I'm asking you."

"Costs money to hire hands that don't mind being shot at."

Hale had the money it took: two pokes of gold, one coined and one of nuggets. His final pocket hunting had paid so well that when he told Jane about it, triumphantly, she'd cooled him by saying that he'd either settle down to be a sodbuster or a cattleman, or else find himself a woman who wanted to spend all her days wondering whether Indians or claim jumpers would finish him; wondering finally if he'd go plumb loco the way most prospectors did. But having an eye that always looked beyond the next ridge, Hale had seen an answer for Jane.

His answer had been so simple that not even a smart gal like Jane would think of the catch. He'd merely made as small a payment as the bank would allow, signed notes for the rest, and buried the gold. Once things got bad, Jane would be dazzled out of her notions by the sight of double-eagles, and wheat colored nuggets. She'd see the beauty of gold, which you could tote, as compared with a splash of land, which was hard to shoulder and and harder to spend.

Toward mid-afternoon, Hale rode alone to gab with his neighbor, the Box B. He was near the house when he met Sam Burch, a blocky, pop-eyed man. Burch had just come in from making his rounds. Like Hale, he wore his Colt on the left, butt foremost, for a cross draw. Once planted on the top rail, they got to cases.

"It's Bart Naylor and the Eldorado outfit," Burch said.

"Anyone tried fighting?"

"Man's a fool, starting something he ain't sure he can finish. Always been a heap of war talk, only nobody ever figured the others'd stick when the chips was all down."

Hale said, "That's account there wasn't so far any two men who'd stick together. With two, each knowing the other was one to ride the river with, the others'd have something to tie onto till they got to believing in each other."

After a moment of whittling, Burch looked up, blinking like a toad in a hailstorm. "Meaning you and me?"

"Too early to know who. Maybe it's two other fellows."

Burch asked him to stay and bite a biscuit. There weren't any womenfolks around the house, but the Chinaman was a good hand in the kitchen. When Hale was ready to leave, it was later than he had realized.

Once he put the Box B boundary behind him, Hale poked along, leisurely, yet not entirely at his ease, for what he had heard from Sam Burch suggested that he'd picked a situation a bit too well suited to his purpose. And so, alert, he wasn't caught off guard when Baldy tossed his head and was about to whinny. Hale, beating him to it, checked the greeting to whatever horse was down-stream.

There shouldn't be any horse near enough to scent. There weren't any Rafter JH riders out; neither was it reasonable to think that a stray would have gone so far from the corral. What settled it was the sharp *spang* of a cutter parting tightly stretched wire.

Though the moon wasn't high, there was still too much light to suit Hale, for the wire being cut was part of that which guarded the quicksands; the man at work, being in the shadow of cottonwoods, held all the aces.

Hale dismounted in a hurry. He developed a chill, a sweat, and a dryness of the throat, all at once. Though the wind still kept the strange horse from scenting Baldy, he'd notice him when the gap closed a bit. Hale's next impulse was to mount up and race away from the danger spot so rapidly that the fence cutter wouldn't have a chance for pot-shooting. But failing after a fake struggle was one thing, and sneaking away from his own stretch of quicksand was something else. The varmints at work on the fence were so nearly like claim jumpers that Hale's instincts took command.

He got the .30-30 Winchester from the saddle boot, left his horse in the shadows, and crept down-stream.

Spang! Another wire let go.

Hale cocked the carbine.

JUST ahead of him, and much nearer than the wire cutter he'd heard, there was a scramble and the blast of a .45. While the slug kicked up dirt which spattered Hale's face, the muzzle flame did not blind him, as he'd ducked at the first warning motion. Whether he fired intentionally, or merely let go the hammer of a gun not fully cocked, he never did know. There was a grunt, a thumping and a kicking, and a splash followed by a yell.

From downstream came an answer and a shot. Hale, though still dazed by the action crammed into a brace of seconds, had another shell levered into the chamber. He cut loose at the flash. Like his assailant, he missed, though the man's gasp, and the sound of pebbles dropping over the edge told him it'd been close.

"Hold it, I'll get that son!" the gunner bawled to the wounded man who was splashing in the stream.

Hale fired at the voice.

There was neither answering word nor shot. The man struggling below made so much noise that Hale could not hear the one in front of him, somewhere in the shadows. He knew only that he was being stalked.

"Quit your damn shooting!" the wounded man cried, now in terror. "I'm a-sinking—it's a-getting me!"

For all his wrath, and his having been scared out of a week's growth, Hale's abrupt realization of the plight of the enemy in quicksand shocked him; he came close to being sickened by the wire cutter's predicament. He wanted to yell, "Quit shooting, we'll help him out."

He made a couple of gulping attempts, but his mouth was dry and his throat paralyzed. His face had become too tight for speech. However, before his good sense could check him, he'd said enough to give himself away. Perhaps a splash of moonlight leaking through the leaves had helped expose him. All he knew for certain was that of a sudden, his enemy had flanked him, and had done a good job—too good, in fact.

Both, equally surprised, cut loose and

on the jump. Hale set to work with his Peacemaker. He stumbled over the rifle he'd dropped. He clawed the ground. Baldy bolted. Two other others came a-piling from cover, striking sparks at every jump. The shooting ended as quickly as it had begun, but Hale didn't know that for awhile. A slug had dug a furrow in his scalp and had knocked him senseless.

He did not hear either the final rattle and cough of the man he'd shot to death, nor the choking and strangling of the one sucked into the quicksands. When, head splitting, Hale at last contrived to get to his knees, there was nothing to be heard except a hoot owl. Then he caught the tinkle of a curb chain.

Out in the moonlight, he saw Baldy. The other horses had lit out for home, wherever that was. Hale didn't know what brands they wore, but when they got to their corral, someone would know for sure who had settled a pair of fence cutters. He'd shot away his chance to fail gracefully; the pardners of the two he'd downed would be out for his hide. That handful-of-aces feeling which had warmed him all day now mocked Joab Hale. He had never until this moment realized how simple it is for a fellow to euchre himself.

INSTEAD of burying the fence cutter not swallowed up by quicksand, Hale dumped him into the wagon and drove to Miller's Junction. Bob Durley rode alongside, all the way sniffing the air for trouble. When they got to town and dropped their cargo at the jail house, the sheriff asked, "What happened to the hosses?"

"You sure you don't know already?"

The law spat, and tugged at drooping mustaches. "How'd I know?"

"Town's a-boiling with Eldorado riders."

Without waiting for an answer, they made for the hitch rack near Gilley's General Store. Hale stepped in and asked Ab Gilley for blocks of salt. There wasn't any in town, the old man said, though the next freight would bring some. Meanwhile, he did have table salt, and ice cream salt, bags and bags of each. Hale figured he'd rather wait, though the critters couldn't get at enough natural salt licks.

By then, Durley came in from the front. "Joab, the whole town's alive with Eldorado men. I don't like the looks of it."

"Scared?"

"Only a pure fool wouldn't be."

Hale grimaced. "I'm still scared from last night."

From the doorway of the store, Hale eyed them. While not exactly a hard-case outfit, far as appearances were concened, they had the air of owning the town. They were much too much at home in Miller's Junction, Hale decided; and that he himself was not.

"Bob, I got to see a doctor, right now."

"Hey, what for—"

Hale, hurrying toward the rear, said over his shoulder, "You squat and spit, it's my health that's going bad, not yours."

As he went, he dug into his pocket and sifted the jumble of odds and ends: a jackknife, a double-barreled derringer, a couple of rawhide thongs, a hunk of chalk, and a few chunks of quartz heavy with gold. During his brisk walk down the back street, he wondered if he could trust the doctor, and if he might not be riding ahead of his horse.

He entered Doc Ferrell's place from the back. He said to the white-haired medico, "I'd feel a heap better if you bandaged this bullet crease in my head. I was doing a bit of grappling and falling around last night, and I sprained my wrist, too."

Ferrell was a stern old fellow with white hair and bushy white brows. After a long moment of studying his patient, he said, "Not that one, son, the other."

"It's my left that's sprained, Doc."

"Suit yourself, but you'll have a better chance with the right bandaged."

"Keeping my gun hand wrapped up can't save my hide more'n so far, or for so long. Whether my left is or ain't sprained, you bandage it like I told you."

When Hale left the doctor's workshop, his left hand was muffled and supported by a sling. In the waiting room, he paused to make a few adjustments. Once content, he stepped into the glare of the street.

Eldorado riders eyed him. They didn't frown, they didn't scowl, they didn't make pointed talk for him to take up or ignore as they hunkered down at the watering trough and gossipped. But they made him feel that he'd bitten off a chunk.

An Eldorado wagon, leaving the freight office, pulled up at Gilley's store. Just

then, a solid, blocky man stepped from a red wheeled buggy drawn by a smart Morgan mare with ELCC on her shoulder. He wore a long black coat under his linen duster; a black vest of figured silk, spanned by a slender watch chain with a black fob whose adornment was a gold monogram B. N.

Hale sized up the squarish face, the firm mouth with the square trimmed mustache; he noted that the dark eyes looking from beneath heavy dark brows were neither threatening nor defiant. The man moved smoothly, without swagger. His power spoke for itself, and he had in him no more bluster than did a mountain.

"Good morning. You're Joab Hale, I believe."

"I am. Rafter JH." Hale glanced at the men who loaded ice cream salt into their wagon; Eldorado men. "Don't think I know you."

"Bart Naylor. I was thinking of coming out to see you."

"This sort of saves you the trouble," Hale said pleasantly. "I came in to get a bit of doctoring done."

NAYLOR considered for a moment. "We have always been interested in Miller's Valley. It's good land. Any time you want to take a fair profit on yours, Eldorado will deal with you."

"Well, now, that's mighty interesting," Hale said, all in a glow of boyish-seeming good will. "Some gents came out last night, and I dealt with them."

Naylor smiled appreciatively. "So I gathered from the sheriff."

He nodded, raised a hand to combine salute and dismissal, and went to his buggy. Durley stepped from behind the door jamb. "That cripple stuff ain't going to help you. I know it's on the way, I seen it a couple times already, and it's so near now I can taste it."

"They don't want you, Bob. They want the owner."

"Where's that argument put me, skillethead?"

"What you don't see, don't concern you. You get out. I'm ordering you to. Get that wagon rolling loud, and leave your hoss for me. I might be needing it."

"I—uh—listen—"

"I can fire you," Hale interrupted; tone and face made the boyishness he'd displayed to Naylor seem very far away. "And when you're not working for me, it is not your job to stand by me."

Durley, beaten, made a helpless gesture.

Hale went on, "If they're going to cut down on us, flat-footed, two is no better than one, is it?"

"Hell, no, but—"

"They got to make a stab at having it fair. Whether the law is scared, lazy, or bought-and-paid for, I don't know and you can't say for sure—but, they'll go just so far. Now you git!"

Hale watched Durley drive down the dusty main street and swing out of sight. He watched the Eldorado men's interest in Durley's move. Naylor was out of sight. Whatever happened, he'd know nothing. Eldorado cowpokes, in twos and threes, made for the saloons which, by some oddity, they had thus far been ignoring.

Of a sudden, Hale realized that there were no loafers anywhere near in view. No one squatted in any of the doorways of vacant buildings. No one stood in any shop entrance. When Hale stepped into the street, to make for the horse Durley had left, there was only one other man in sight. He came purposefully toward Hale, rather than quickly, yet he lost no time.

Hale got the right-left flick of the man's glance.

This was it. And from putting two and two together, Hale knew that this was the number one gunslick, the man who handled special chores for Naylor; or, if not that, then one who had a personal grudge because of the previous night's doings at the quicksands.

There was neither time nor need to decide which. There was hardly time even to see what manner of face this man had. Rather, Hale saw, but the seeing made no impression at all, except that the stranger moved smoothly and surely.

The man said, in a voice so loud as to be shocking in the stillness of Miller's Junction, "You dirty son! Get out of my way!"

Hale halted. He twisted a bit, but made not a move for the Colt at his left. "You can't pick a fight. Don't try," he said, quietly.

The man slapped Hale smartly, and stepped back.

Hale didn't budge. He watched the tight-faced man's fury rise to the choking point; this was what Hale wanted. Fury at last came out soft voiced: "I'll give you the edge, JH, I'll give you the edge if you're scairt. Reach!"

Soft-voiced, except for the final word: it had a whiplash pop. Involuntarily, and despite all his cool wariness, Hale jerked; his right hand moved up from beside his thigh. That was what the gunner had wanted, and he had tricked Hale into giving it to him. The man drew like greased lighting.

Hale, whose gun was carried for a cross-draw, had not come into anything like a slap for leather: but the gunslick was working to a fixed pattern. The victim's hand makes a false move, and you pour it to him, and it is self-defense—the lawless, despite himself, paying deference to the law.

Flame poured from Hale's bandages. The muffled derringer spewed two slugs, each a full ounce of lead, and from less than two yards range. The blast knocked the gunslick over. He fell, he lay clawing and kicking the dust. He had not finished the draw that was to have beaten Hale by a mile. And now Hale stood over him, gun in his right hand, to finish him if need be.

"Keno! Barney got him!" someone shouted, and darted into the open.

Hale turned, gun leveled. "Keno it is, gents. Way you look surprised shows what you all were a-thinking of."

Then Bob Durley called from behind Hale, "I went to borry a scatter gun. You figure I'd run out, you skillet-headed son?"

The Eldorado men were sensible enough to backtrack. In doing so, they showed their professional caliber. They didn't even pick up the one in the dust. Business was business, and let Hale enjoy the day's winnings: there were other days.

Hale said, as he and Durley left town, once the few formalities were tended to, "You drive on, I'm riding over to Lem Weaver's to see a lady."

Durley grunted and obeyed, leaving Hale to wonder whether, after the gun chores he'd done, Jane might not decide that pocket hunting was not only a healthful but also a quite honorable business.

CHAPTER TWO

The Plague of Fire

SINCE none of Lem Weaver's outfit had had been in town that day, there was no news of the shooting; and Hale kept things that way by cooking up a plausible account of how come he had some patchwork in his scalp. They hoorawed him about this, and about Jane, keeping it up until supper, after which he hazed her to the front porch and hooked his spurs on the railing.

"Oh, do tell me all about the spread! I've been on edge and impatient and thrilled ever since Lem told me you'd bought it."

"Talked about it all through supper."

"Tell me about the house, please. Every time I asked you, you changed the subject."

"Got roof, walls and floor."

"I could throttle you! Is it wood, sod, 'dobe?"

"Wood. Hot in summer, cold in winter."

"You don't sound enthusiastic," she reproached.

"Give me time. Anyway, I've met you half way, starting to be a cattle baron, so how about us getting married right away."

"Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't, not until school's out."

Hale made a solemn show of counting on his fingers. "What do they need a school for, anyway, if these kids are going to grow up to be cowpunchers? Another thing, school's going to shut down, cattle raising don't ante in enough taxes to keep the school going."

"Do we have to go into that again?"

"Honey, we sure do not! Because I'm going to herd cow critters till I eat grass, grow hoofs, chaw a cud and bawl like a bull. I'm aiming to get the place all prettied up, with dotted Swiss curtains and fussy stuff. You wait!"

And that was the way it stood when Hale made for the bunkhouse, instead of heading for home; they'd sat up mighty late.

Once in his blankets, Hale couldn't get to sleep. for while Jane didn't realize it, the contest had not ended. The brats at school spent heaps of time trying to please Jane: they'd quit chawing tobacco in class, and they didn't use anything but rocks and fists for their fighting anymore. She had tamed them and they loved it: and it was natural enough for her to assume that she had as easily tamed a man who knew his own mind, and his own way of living. But Jane was dead wrong.

He'd decided to let someone else tell her about the shooting. Better way of getting her worried, because the story would be built up as he himself couldn't build it. He might not even have to say, as he had during those many evenings of lovers' wranglings, "Honey, a cow critter wears its hoofs all the way to the hocks to keep from starving, and there's finally enough fat to hide the bones, it's up and butchered. And the fellow who owns the cattle gets to be like what he herds around, looking for grass so long he can't get his face higher than the grass."

He began to be grateful for the shooting scrapes which would hasten the time when, instead of wanting him to throw good money after bad, she'd bless the golden hoard which could liberate her. But he was all keyed up from trying to figure how much nearer that time had been brought, now that Bart Naylor had showed his teeth.

Whether it was the whimpering of the dog, or the smell of smoke which brought Hale out of the borderland between sleep and waking, he didn't know. There seemed rather to have been a premonitory unease, as though in his half-sleep he had found a flaw in his plans for Jane. Then he wondered, gropingly, at the smoke. After what seemed a long time of confusion, he sat bolt upright and grabbed his boots.

Outside was a ruddy glow, and not that of dawn, as for a moment he had thought. He heard the crackle of burning hay and the snap of shingles. "Fire!" he yelled, and made for the door. "Get off your ears!"

The cowpuncher lost no time in piling out. And when, scrambling for buckets and gunnysacks, they wavered between horse trough and rain water barrels, they saw that house and barn and outbuildings were all ablaze.

LEM WEAVER and his wife came racing out, smoke at their heels. It was all too clear that the bucket brigade had not even a Chinaman's chance. That fact shocked the cowhands to the verge of stupor.

"Where's Jane?" Hale yelled, catching Weaver by the shoulder.

The fierce grip and the shouted question brought the cattleman out of the daze. He blinked and asked his wife, "Martha, you see her come out?"

Hale, himself on the ragged edge of panic, glanced about, saw nothing worth seeing, and then dashed into the front room. He slammed the door after him to check the draft which made the flames spread from the kitchen. Smoke, thickening about him, choked and blinded him. Crouching close to the floor, he made his way for the hall from which the bedrooms opened. At its farther end was the kitchen and dining room.

"Jane!" he cried, or would have, had not hot air and smoke made him cough. He tried again, and did no better.

Then he saw what rolled on the floor: Jane, wrapped cocoon-like in a blanket. Gasping and blinking, he darted for the doorway. By now he knew that she was trying to get clear of the blanket, and he managed to say, "Stay put, I'll tote you out!"

He scooped her up, She cried out from pain, then relaxed in his arms. By the increasing glare, he saw that her face was black, and her hair a matted mass. And that first clear sight of what he had picked up hit him with an impact more sickening, more paralyzing, more weakening than had been that of any of those instants in which had come the knowledge that unless he did better than well with his gun, he'd be something which had stopped existing.

Then as if in devil's mockery there flashed the full loveliness of Jane by moonlight, on the front porch, that very night; and Jane by morning and by noon day and by setting sun: the copper-golden glint of ringlets caressing small ears, the fine, smooth throat and cheeks, the small, pert nose, and the dimples which came into

view just a flash before her teeth showed in a smile. All that he had remembered of each sight of her took its turn at momentary life in his mind, in a seeing behind the eye, and he had not the strength to make himself believe that the blackened and moaning burden in his arms could ever again become the girl whose image tormented him.

Lem Weaver and his wife had ventured back into the house. Coughing, choking, stumbling about, they seemed not quite sure whether they'd returned to save heirlooms or to find Jane. Opening the door had renewed the draft, so that a ferocious heat lashed Hale as, driven by the terror in his mind, he fled from more than the flames behind him. He was sure his hair was afire, and that his boots curled from the heat. But he paused to say, "Lem, get the medicine chest—y'understand—medicine chest—Jane's burned bad—I *said medicine chest, damn it, medicine chest!* You, Martha, get the hell out. You'll be fried afore you can save anything. Grab some sheets!"

Later, when they had doctored and bandaged Jane, she was able to say, "I thought I heard a noise in back; when I opened the kitchen door, there was a puff of fire, and I was splashed with blazing kerosene. Lucky I had sense enough to get a blanket and roll, I didn't dare scream, I was all ablaze. And crazy from panic. Hit my head on the bedstead. Before I could move again, the fire was roaring. . .Joab, I'm not burned much, don't look at me that way, it's mainly soot."

One of the cowpokes had raced to get Doc Ferrell. The medico arrived shortly before dawn. When he came out of the bunkhouse where they had put Jane, he said to Hale, "She isn't going to be scarred, and I've given her something to deaden the pain. Better take her to town where she can get proper care."

"I'll take her to the Rafter JH," Hale answered. "Mrs. Weaver can be tending to her, while Lem is building a lean-to or something."

When Hale circled the smoking ruins, he saw what convinced him that this calamity had been made to order: a number of kerosene cans whose tops had been knifed so that they could be emptied quickly. Neither Lem nor anyone else would open a can that way for filling lamps or lanterns; but it was handy enough for splashing a man's house and buildings and gear before touching them off.

He turned and called Weaver. "Lem," he demanded, pointing, "this wasn't an accident. Who's got a grudge against you?"

"I was expecting trouble. But not this bad. Just fence cutting, and hazing my critters all over hell's half acre."

"You been expecting it?" Hale fairly howled.

"Uh-huh. Been a dry year, two years running."

"Not in this valley!"

"That's just it, Joab. Not in this valley. We got enough water when the others are short."

"Bart Naylor? Eldorado?"

"CAN'T prove a thing. But they been overgrazing their range and now they're aiming to make us pay. I been expecting trouble ever since I seen how they overgrazed, till they get first a flood, and then nary a drop the rest of the year."

"Didn't know any better, the skillet-heads?"

"Sure, Naylor knew better, but the stockholders back east had to get their money back in a hurry, and they give him his orders."

"I met him yesterday," Hale said, and told of the fence cutting, and the gun fight in Miller's Junction. "He's only one man, and it'll only take another man to catch him alone. And finish him."

Weaver spat. "Think the new manager'd be different from Naylor?"

And that gave Hale something to think about. "Lem," he demanded, after a long silence, "you figure it'd be right, having Jane and Martha over to my place, after I tangled with Naylor's gunslicks?"

"Safe as any other place, Joab. Safer, maybe, account you'll be watching your house, and they'll be hitting you some other way. Just like you can't pull that bandaged hand trick a second time—you got to think of a different one."

"Well, my house is yours, Lem, and maybe I got some tools and a bit of lumber that'll help you get fixed up. And maybe I can think of a different one."

Hale quickly learned that his gun play

had started more than he had expected. It wasn't so much that he'd downed a professional; it was rather that he had anticipated trickery and had made it kick back. His neighbors came to see him: Linfoot, and Daley, Crawford and Jameison, and Sam Burch of the Box B. Like Lem Weaver, they wondered what he had in his medicine bag for the next attempt.

One said, "Way I see it, they burned Lem out to get his family and the schoolmarm bunched up with you, so you won't be quite so free and easy and independent."

Hale pulled a long face. "Don't know rightly what I aim to do."

Another one of those who sat on the top rail with him spat and said, "Mebbe like you say, it was as much fool luck as headwork, but good luck is better'n good sense sometimes."

A thus far silent neighbor looked up from his whittling. "A pocket hunter'd naturally have a different sort of luck, he's a different kind of critter to begin with."

While they hadn't put it in so many words, Hale felt that his neighbors, worn down by fence cutting, rustling and bank pressure, were looking to him for leadership and luck. Old Ben Crawford summed it up by saying, "Ain't so much that you hurt them skunks as it is the way you hurt 'em. F'rinstance, they aimed to have your critters bog down, and instead a fence cutter gets bogged plumb out of sight. And the coyote hounding you into drawing so's he could fill you with lead—see what I mean, they been made downright ridiculous."

The pressure began to squeeze Hale uncomfortably. He'd be a pure strain fool, heading a war in a cause he wanted to get out of quickly as possible. Happily, he remembered what Sam Burch had said about the inability of neighbors to stick together when all the chips were down. So he proposed, "Eldorado's whittled us down, one at a time. But we outnumber them. If we gang up and all at once hit them, wipe them out, put a bounty on their scalps and finish them in one big drive, we've got Naylor roostered to a finish!"

He got down from the rail. He didn't wait for comment, because the silence told him there wouldn't be any. He was right. One by one, they moseyed home. They were great to defend themselves when they had to, they hollered bloody murder when they were hurt, but they balked at his simple answer. For which he was of course grateful, and to hell with them!

CHAPTER THREE

Stampede

RATHER than leave the ranchhouse exposed. Hale sent only a few riders to patrol the fences; just enough to make a showing for Jane, who was recovering nicely. She said, as they sat on the veranda, a few evenings later, "I got a good look at myself in the glass when Mrs. Weaver changed the bandages—no, you will not give her a hand! And I'll not move to any of the neighbors. I've got a grand excuse for being here, and I'm staying. I want to see you build up this spread. I want you to know I'm proud of you."

"That's running loyalty into the ground. Keeps me on edge, waiting for the next trick."

"Which is why I won't hide out. Though if I'd known what you were going to get into, I'd surely not—"

He interrupted. "You didn't pick this valley. All you gave me was the idea, and naturally I did want to be close enough for you to watch things work out."

"Anyway, I'm proud of you, and why wouldn't I be? I heard your neighbors when they came to talk to you. You've put new heart and life into them."

That night, while Hale was in the bunkhouse, sitting in on a bit of stud poker, far-off shouts brought him to his feet. One of the cowpokes on guard at the barn came dashing in. "You hear that?" he yelled. "Something's got our critters on the run, hell-bent."

The brawling, the rumbling, the pounding, they sounded bad and were getting worse. Hale said, "Steady, you! You and Bud, set tight! Don't let anything pull you away from the house."

Before riding out after his men, he paused to tell Jane, "Something is raising ructions up the river. You and Mrs. Weaver better make for the little 'dobe, just in case it's a trick to get us away from the house. Better go in and stay

there. It'll stop bullets if there's any shooting. Keep your head from the door, and if there's got to be a burn-out, let 'er burn! Don't try to save anything!"

He mounted up and rode. The nearer he came to the roar and rumble, on the far side of the stream, the more certain he was that something mighty odd was happening. Against the first glow of moonrise, cattle raced crazily: not a herd, but a dozen here, a score there. At first, he guessed that lobos might have stampeded them, but there couldn't be enough varmints on the loose to set so many separated bunches running.

He heard the *spang* of barbed wire letting go, and the splintering of posts as a mass of crazed animals smashed headlong into a fence. At the same time, brush crackled behind him. There was a splashing and a bawling and a bellowing as others bogged down in quicksands.

In the distance, riders tried to head the critters, bunch them, get them milling: but nothing worked as it should have. Hale charged for a clump of steers. He drew his Colt and fired. The leader dropped. Some of those behind piled up in a tangle of hoofs and horns. Others, hurdling the heap, cleared it and kept on.

Durley, panting and gasping, rode up. His horse snorted foam, and splashed Hale.

"Bob, what the devil's going on?"

"They went loco. No one's been hazing them, we found not a hair or hide of anyone. It'd a-taken an army to start 'em all at once, right where they grazed, without first bunching them up." Then, bitterly: "A sight more wire to fix than if we'd given fence cutters all the chance they wanted. They'd've leastwise left the posts."

"Loco," the men echoed as they joined the two. "Worse'n drunk squaws."

"Loco, hell!" one chipped in. "On the prod, looking for trouble."

His horse had a long, ragged gash on the flank. A passel of critters had turned on him to run him down.

HALE went to look at the fences. As nearly as he could tell from the breaks, cattle had gone hog-wild in every direction. For the next few days, every hand would be busy killing cripples and skinning the dead for hide and tallow.

At dawn, a dawn red-eyed as Hale himself, he saw something which set him wondering. There were glistening crystals on the ground.

"Looks like rock salt," he muttered, and dismounted.

"Sure is," Durley said.

Hale tasted a crystal. "Sure is. Wasn't any when we rode around the other day."

"That's gospel."

Presently, they came on the trampled scraps of a new gunnysack. There were others, at intervals, north and south.

"Salt crazy," Bob Durley said. "When critters get salt hungry and then get a lot of it, they go loco. Can't get it fast enough from licking blocks to hurt 'em, but thiss-away, they hog it."

They both remembered how, on the morning they'd taken the body of the fence cutter into town, they'd seen Eldorado men loading up a wagon with rock salt and table salt. Hale spat and said, "Might've known they weren't aiming to make so much ice cream."

Durley grinned bleakly. "I might've knowed, but I was worried about all those gunhands. When you figuring to start that war?"

"Can't rightly say, off hand. Depends on how hostile this trick is going to make our neighbors. Take all of them to make us an army."

Durley looked let down, but didn't argue. That made Hale feel better.

When he returned to the ranchhouse, he was dog tired and hungry; and when, after breakfast, Jane cornered him, he sensed that his disappointing people had not stopped with Durley. The bandages which swathed her face concealed neither eyes nor voice: and of these, both had gone wrong.

"Mrs. Weaver and I didn't wait for trouble," she said, "we took your advice. We made up a pallet in the little dobe."

"Well, now," he groped, uneasily, "wasn't a bad idea, even if it didn't turn out to be necessary. Rest all right?"

"If you have to bury money," she flared, "you might do a better job of it."

"What money?"

"Coin and nuggets. New buckskin pouches. The ones you showed me. The ones that made me beg you to settle down.

Only, they weren't quite as full, almost but not quite. You've not bought this ranch, you've been pretending. You've been fooling me!"

"You got no business snooping!" he retorted.

"I wasn't snooping! I saw something had been buried, maybe by one of the owners before you, so I moved the loose bricks, and—"

She burst into tears. Hale laid a hand on her shoulder but she jerked away. "Don't try to make up to me now, I can't endure dishonesty!"

"Honey, listen here," he protested. "Way it is, I gambled nothing but a down payment. Good Lord, you mean you'd rather see me lose my shirt for lack of using my head?"

"If you'd put all your money into this ranch, you'd have to fight for your rights, you'd have your heart in it, you'd not be acting, pretending, cheating!"

"Downright silly, shooting the whole stake"

"Oh, it is, is it?" she cried. "You spent so many hours telling me how simple it is for a pocket hunter to go out and find more gold! You were tricking me there. Your father died with nothing to his name but two burros anda blanket full of holes, and—"

"Then what're you yelling about saying I should have shot the whole works in this fool cattle business?"

"I wanted you to have a real stake in the country, grow up with it, be one of the people that're building the country, instead of an irresponsible gambler, poking around in the rocks, picking up some loot, and running with it, first crazy rich, and then poor as Job's turkey. And now I know you've got so little responsibility that you tricked me and thought it was smart."

"All right," he shouted, "I'll pay off the mortgage!"

"Keep your buried treasure! Now that I know what you are, I don't care what you do!"

She turned and fled. Hale stood there, frowning and finger-combing his hair. "Bound to be dead wrong, no matter what you do," he muttered. "I not only got to win, I got to stick to this dang business till I've grown hoofs, till I eat grass, and bawl like a bull." He sighed deeply.

IN THE week which followed, Lem Weaver had scrapped up enough lumber to throw together a shack; and Jane went to board with another neighbor. Hale meanwhile rode from spread to spread, trying to organize the ranchers who had hemmed-and-hawed their way toward thrusting leadership on him; but he began in optimism and ended in despair. The men who had so recently been impressed by his first two telling blows against Eldorado now pulled long faces. The war talk which had come so easily had now evaporated.

Worse yet, he had the growing conviction that each man to whom he had talked had broken out with an itch to have Hale mount up and visit someone else. He ended by saying to himself, "They act like I had smallpox or something. Not a man of 'em trusts me any more."

Near as he could figure it, his attitude after the salt poisoning had betrayed him. Instead of being taken for a man unshaken in the face of disaster, he was a queer cuss who didn't give a hoot. These men he'd said were as grass-minded as the critters to which they devoted their lives had seen through him. They wanted no truck with him.

Hale cached his gold under a newly replaced fence post. The next night, he rode to see Jane, and tell her the result of his belated efforts. She was neither angry nor unkind. She said, "Maybe I was wrong, asking a man to act against his own nature, Joab. It's just as well that you didn't put all your money into something you don't believe in."

"Well, I'm believing in it now."

She shook her head. "No, you're trying just for my sake. It's your own lack of belief that has made your neighbors lose confidence. And I don't, I never did feel that a cattleman is next to God, or a cut above other people. It's just that you were a rainbow chaser, trying to get something without producing anything in return. Not that you really did ever get anything for nothing, it's rather that you thought you did, and wished you could—and that sort of wish is what's all wrong. The clean up and clear out idea."

He regarded her with bewilderment and yet, with understanding.

Jane sighed. "Oh, I'm lecturing and lecturing. I ought to know better!"

"You mean I am that pig stupid or pig stubborn?"

"Darling, of course I don't!" she answered, with warm affection in voice and eyes. "It's just that I've been silly enough to try to convince your brain, when this is something you have to get with your heart, or else it hasn't a bit of meaning."

"Suppose," he challenged, "I still can make a go of it?"

"We've both been horse trading, and in things that can't be traded. Do your best, Joab, seeing it through or quitting, whatever is really in your heart."

Hale knew he'd got nowhere. In fact, he was in worse case than before. And as he rode home, he said to himself, "First I kicked like a bay steer account she was unreasonable, and now I'm kicking account she's plumb reasonable, too damn reasonable."

He was on his own land, though still some distance from the house, when he learned that his pondering had distracted him, and that he had ridden headlong into a nasty layout.

The men lurking in ambush could have shot him from the saddle. Instead, one of them, popping up from behind a clump of mesquite, dabbed a loop, a deft cast which bound Hale's arms to his sides before he had a Chinaman's chance either of ducking or going for his gun. Baldy snorted and showed his heels. Hale thumped like a bag of meal to the hard ground. The impact knocked him breathless for a moment during which three lurkers came from cover. Their lying in wait indicated that they'd been watching him, studying his moves, so that when he went to see Jane, his return route would be a foregone conclusion.

"No hide-out gun this time," one said gruffly. "You been getting too big for your pants."

Hale gasped, "You sons seem scared I might slap leather."

HE WAS sure that such was not the case, for they could have cut him off, hip high, without warning: but the chill of apprehension which gripped him compelled him to talk back and buck up his courage to meet whatever purpose they had in taking him alive. The taunt with which they'd greeted him was a foreshadowing of vengeance: they wanted him to know he was in Eldorado hands. They wanted him alive for at least awhile.

Then, by the light of the waning moon, he noted that the three were masked. Even so, he didn't figure that his life was worth any too much. If they were of a piece with the rest of Naylor's gunhands, they wore masks from old habit; they felt more comfortable that way, just as a snort of whiskey and a chaw of tobacco first thing in the morning makes some men feel better about facing a day's work.

One of the trio grabbed Hale's Colt and stuffed it into his own waist band. A second dropped a loop around Hale's neck. The third kicked him from the rear, making his knees fold. He'd barely dug his chin into the ground when they were dragging him, bumping and jouncing, toward a cottonwood not far from the stream.

When they got to the foot of the tree, Hale was so nearly throttled that two men had to hold him up while the third whipped his riata over a limb. Leaving a man dangling in the breeze, he told himself, would set a much more effective example to the neighbors than would shooting him in his tracks.

He hadn't the breath for yelling, and if he had, he was much too far from the house to be heard. Wouldn't be anyone there anyway, excepting maybe old Link Bisbee, who was stove-up from a horse's having fallen on him. Durley and the other had gone up-stream with the chuck-wagon to round up what critters there were for shipment. He hadn't kept any men guarding the house, since the departure of the women had removed the enemy's strongest incentive for burning him out.

A man could throw up a sod house and to hell with 'em! But that'd break any woman's heart, so, arson was for family men, and hanging for bachelors. Hale was so sure of a strangling finish that he quit wondering how long he could hold out by tucking in his chin and bulging his neck muscles, and began thinking of Jane.

Funny, he didn't blame her a bit. Aft-

er all the hours he'd spent, cursing her fool notions, he now had in him not a dime's worth of resentment. Being a goner without hope, it was good to think of Jane while he was still able. And what he thought was, "I wish to God I had a chance to tell her it was pure cussedness made me pick this piece of country, that she hadn't ought to hold this against herself . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Torture

TWO of the enemy hauled on the riata. The supple rawhide bit into Hale's throat. He gagged and gulped, and for awhile he was able to support himself with his toes. There was a roaring in his ears. Red flashes danced before his eyes. Each hard won, rasping breath did little more than tantalize him.

He couldn't touch the ground any more. Or maybe his senses were failing so that he didn't feel the contact. Then, bit by bit, extinction backed away from him, and he knew that he had strained every fibre in a futile fight; he was aching, devoid of strength, and sickened by the knowledge that he still lived only because they had let him down.

"Just a sample," one said. "If you don't crave the rest, tell us where you got that gold cached."

Hale make a choking sound. He tried to ask, "What gold?"

They could not have understood, yet they seemed to know what his first words would be. From behind a mask came a contemptuous laugh. "You might've knowed women folks can't keep secrets. Where is that ace-in-the-hole? Tell us, and you can have all the fun you want, playing ranch."

"Tell you—t h e n go—finish me—and—"

"We got no cause to finish you," was the earnest answer. "That'd look bad. Shucks, it'd put a bee in the governor's bonnet, and—"

"Go to hell!" Hale gasped.

The pain of returning senses told him how nearly he had been gone for keeps. If that was all there was to it, they could bust themselves. They seemed to sense his thought, or else they'd had enough experience from previous jobs to guess how a man reasoned. One said, persuasively, "You got no more hide-out tricks to pull in town. The next fair fight's your finish, and it'll look strictly personal, man to man. We'd ruther not finish it thisaway, unless you hone for it and beg for it."

Hale was not stalling for time by going stubborn; he had no cause to believe that delay could save him. And when he cursed them and they hauled again on the riata, he suffered long and agonizing moments of regret. He didn't know why he'd gone bull-headed. There actually was a good chance that they did prefer to settle him in what they and the law could call a fair fight. It was a fact that the territorial governor would go on a rampage if there were rubbed under his nose evidence that ranchers were being hanged—whereas no one but a pure fool would give second thought to yarns about fence cutting and rustling and carefully rigged gun fights. It was rough country, and if you can't be rough yourself, stay back east where it's easy.

Yet Hale refused to answer until he came once more to the point when he could not have replied. And when they let him down to revive, he began to understand his own resistance: it was not a fight for nuggets and coin, but for integrity. She'd believe him when he said that the bank had foreclosed because he'd not been able to pay the interest on the loan, and that masked men had squeezed the golden hoard out of him. But nothing could alter the fact that he'd buried his money to hornswoggle her, make light of her earnest convictions. Wasn't so much what she'd think as it was his own recognition of what he was thinking of himself.

"Go—fffffind—it—y o u r s e l f," Hale rasped.

The three eyed one another. Then he did gain hope. Maybe they didn't have the guts to hang him. Except for the sake of the coin, framing a gun fight next time he came to town would be just as good. That done, they could comb the ranch of cattle; the cowhands wouldn't stay, once the boss was gone.

"We can try something else," one said firmly.

THE riata which bound his arms to his side was tight only as it was so pulled; and uncertainty had made the man ease up. The only hold was now about Hale's neck. He was reminded of its force whenever he swayed on his feet. He was shaky and sweating. Hardly able to breath even though the noose was not tight. His throat was badly swollen. He might end by strangling without further attention from his captors.

But he felt now that he'd bucked them to a standstill. Time was worth playing for, though he couldn't quite see how.

"Uh—arrrrh—if I could—believe—"

"You can believe us. You're a trouble-maker, and if you pay off and light a shuck, we'll be happier. We got nothing against you for your gun work. That's all in the game. Your fool neighbors begun getting notions when you got smart, so you got to vamoose. We don't have to hang you to teach them a lesson. We done taught them already."

This rang true. It brought sharply back to Hale how his neighbors suddenly began to avoid dealing with him. Also, it was clear to him that however this had come about, it must have been Eldorado work, and moreover, that the effect could not be counted on to endure, unless he got out of the valley.

"All right," he said, realizing that however hard it would be to regain his integrity, being hanged wouldn't achieve it. "I buried a poke of nuggets in—"

"Nuggets, huh? How about the coin. We know all about it."

"Okay, I moved, 'em—"

"From the 'dobe, sure. Now you're talking, Hale."

"Under a—a—"

Then an outsider cut in, "You sons, let him go!"

It was old Link: stove up, and a poor excuse of a cowhand at the best, he'd come up on Hale's horse. He had a Colt leveled. The barrel wavered. This was clear in the moonlight.

Hale yelled, "Don't, Link! You got no chance! I'm all right."

"Poke up your hands," the old cowpoke commanded in his cracked voice. "You let him go, or I'll blow your guts out!"

"He's all right, pop, this is jest money talk. Didn't you hear him say, it's all okay?"

Link's wavering weapon steadied for a moment. "I tell you—"

He didn't have a chance. He was facing experts who could give a man a draw and then slap leather and down him. Shadow favored them, and so did old Link's fear of hitting his own boss. They went for their guns.

Link missed. Baldy reared up. Pistols blazed from right and left. Hale, on his feet and revived, got his hands free in time to get into the game. He flung himself against the man who had taken his gun. Lead combed the air as the two went down. Link was still shooting, and now from the ground. Hale snatched his own weapon from the man he'd bounced against a rock.

He jammed the gun against the man and fired. Old Link got up with a howl, and came a-shooting. Hale rolled clear and got in two more shots. Even as he did so, Link Bisbee toppled.

The field was clear. Hale, the only man who could stand, ran over to the reckless ally who had fought against all reason.

"You old idiot," Hale said as he knelt beside the cowpuncher, "You shouldn't've—damn it—" He choked, nearly busted out crying like a kid. "You old fool, I told you I was all right."

"Huh! Warn't for you—it's jest principle—why, you young squirt—wipe your dang nose and quit sniffling—I can carry more lead in my belly than them sons can tote on their backs."

And he stuck to those words until he died at the Rafter JH house, shortly after sunrise. He outlived the two he had cut down, by some fluke, when he shouldn't have got in one effective shot.

Hale, going out of the house, stared for a long time at the fencepost under which the gold was buried. He cursed it between clenched teeth; and he cursed it silently, in his heart. He was only adding to the curse that had been on it from the start.

WHEN Hale got his neighbors rounded up, he said, "You all know what happened, and what might've happened if old Link hadn't come a-looking for me, when

my hoss came home with an empty saddle. He knew I'd gone to see Jane Fraler, and he knew the way I'd oughta come back if I was coming. Anyway, before the shooting started, I learned it was account of you folks that Naylor wanted me cut out of the herd. I'd been thinking it was because you all had me branded for a no account knot-head that you been steering clear of me."

Long-faced Linfoot said, "We done thought that, too, but it was first of all banking trouble. Joab, we can't have any truck with you. We're glad you ain't been hung, but where'd we get with a war against Eldorado if we got ourselves foreclosed, all in a heap?"

Hale nodded, grinned. "I knew it was banking trouble. They told me enough. All right, it takes a sheriff to make a foreclosure. And if Eldorado can buy or scare a sheriff, we can gang up and first of all run the sheriff all the way to Mexico, and the banker after him."

"That'd sure get the governor turning out with sojers."

"Worse things than that have happened." Hale eyed them, a man at a time. "But we'd have Eldorado burned out, shot up, and scattered to hell before the governor heard about it."

They had no heart for it. They fidgeted, they mumbled about law and order. They agreed that Naylor's pack was not lawful or orderly, but—

"Sam Burch is right!" Hale broke in. "Sam, you told me the first day I laid eyes on you that nobody'd stick."

Burch, blinking like a toad in a hailstorm, answered, "That's human nature, Joab. Don't hold it against us. You can run a sheriff out, but you can't run law out for keeps, and neither can Naylor. Some of us is going to get hurt when you're wiped out for a trouble maker, but some of us is going to hold on and stay put."

Gil Waters piped up, "You can't rightly buy your hide with ourn."

Hale took a deep breath. He stretched from the waist. His voice was still hoarse from the swelling of his throat. "Old Link bought my hide with his. That's the way you figure it?"

"Sure, he did. But he was your man."

Hale shouted in triumph, "Link didn't buy my hide. Link went in a-smoking to save my property. One thing you don't know, account of I am the only man alive of those that were there: I told Link, to hell with a poke of gold. I'm all right. This is settled, but the old fool came in a-shooting when he didn't have a Chinaman's chance. He got one for sure, and maybe two, with me taking the third for keeps. Stove-up Link, with his paws all knotty from rheumatism, bleary-eyed old Link, he cut loose and instead of being shot from the saddle, he fell out and went hog wild and got the gunslicks with their pants down.

"I'll do my best to be as good a man as Link, if you give me backing. I was choked and half dead, remember, so it was little enough help, but it was some.

"And the first move I make is, I'll pay the interest for all of you, far as my stack will stretch. Come on!"

He led them to the fence post. He cut wires and began twisting and pushing and tugging. When the post came up, he dipped in and got the gold. He spilled the coin on the ground.

"Link bought that with his hide." Hale blinked, wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I begged him not to. He wasn't doing it for me, he was doing it for his outfit. So I can't ever touch that money. I'd be afraid to buy me even a sack of Durham out of it. I got to give it away, and if you got Link's spunk and guts, we'll wipe Eldorado out or make Christians out of the coyotes."

THEY drifted into the bank, some with talk of poker winnings, or of legacies, or of bad debts unexpectedly collected; and it took time to take the bag of nuggets to a distant assay office to turn them into cash.

"Still and all, they smelt a rat at the bank," Lem Weaver said to Hale. "And I asked him, was it so odd, a man not being too far behind in his interest?"

Hale shrugged. "Naturally, the banker's best friend is his biggest account, but he can't lose. If we wipe out Eldorado, we'll be just that much bigger, and he's okay. If they wipe us out, they're bigger, and he is still setting pretty. Let him smell a rat, and let him talk where he wants to."

"But they might get a hunch we're on the prod."

"Huh! Just two things they can do: get forted up to protect their buildings, or stay strung out in line shacks to keep their critters from being stampeded. Whichever it is, we hit what they haven't covered—and if they spread out to cover everything, we got the choice of pouring all we got into one spot. We'll know where that is going to be, and they won't."

Hale talked to others. The more he heard, the more he realized that neither words nor gold had given force to the plan, and that a dead man's example was not enough; and that had old Link stopped to think, he'd not have been so uselessly loyal. The ranchers had had too much time to think.

When he went to see Jane, she said, "They'll stick, Joab."

"Honey, they're herd-minded, cattle-minded all right, but in the wrong way. Unless they're plumb loco and stampeding, they'll hold their own one at a time against a lobo, and that's all. He looked at her sharply, accusingly. "You're weakening inside, yourself."

"Yes, I am," she admitted, after a moment during which her face showed how hard it had been to be honest. "I've not slept a night through since those three held you up. I egged you into this and you're in so far you wouldn't quit, not even if I wanted you to, or asked you to. I'm weakening, Joab, but you're not."

She looked at him through eyelashes which had finished growing back; soon there'd be not a mark on face or throat. But Hale kept his hands off. The new skin was still so tender that the lightest touch would break it. He licked his lips and shook his head as though to rid himself of sudden giddiness.

"No, I ain't. Not right now, and looking at you, I'm not weakening. But I've got to be looking at knot-heads and keeping them willing to be shot up all in a passel if need be, instead of getting it piecemeal."

Bit by bit, the men of the valley made their plans to give Naylor his lumps. They had all sorts of devices. Meanwhile, the sheriff was busy looking for the ruffians who had tried to hang Hale. He couldn't believe that none had escaped, and neither could he believe that there really had been such an attempt, but he was looking.

Finally, the ranchers were ready to move. Hale and Lem Weaver and Sam Burch were the first ones to go up the valley, and toward the brush-matted hogback whose farther slope was slashed by a deep ravine. This they followed, descending among scattered boulders until they came to the rendezvous to which, night after night, they had packed the gear which their task required. Here they waited for the arrival of the others, who would come in twos and threes.

Cached among the boulders were heavy timbers, a good many bales of hay, and the cans of kerosene. There was also the running gear of two wagons, dismantled to be packed over the ridge: to have driven them in over open country would have left wheel tracks and so aroused the suspicion of Eldorado riders.

While waiting, the three set to work assembling the running gear. Shortly before dusk, others arrived. They had gunnysacks filled with moistened rawhide thongs. With these they lashed together a timber framework which they mounted on the wagon gear. Next they bored loop-holes through the heavy wooden front and sides of the portable barricade. When the chore was done, they had a fort which they could roll right up against whatever building the Eldorado outfit chose to defend, instead of having to trust to total surprise, or a final dash across open ground and in the face of fire.

There was nothing new about the idea. The trick was old as the hills. The only thing new was the notion of teaming up and hunting the enemy instead of thinking of defense.

FINALLY, and well after darkness had fallen, a number of riders tied on with their riatas and snaked the rolling fort into open country. There was no talk, and no smoking. Every curb chain was muffled, and not one horse wore a bit with a "cricket." The hoofs were shod with rawhide; so were the wheels, so no metal would crunch or jar on the rocks which cropped from the lean earth.

The party crawled along. With the whole night ahead of them, the valley

men could take their time. Meanwhile, some of them rode far out to scout the line camps.

As the procession neared its destination, scouts returned; and after a halt to consider their reports, Hale and his companions decided that the whole kit and kaboodle was forted up.

"Won't know when or how we'll hit," Lem Weaver said, "but they're bound to know something's been a-boiling."

"Like stalking game," another chipped in. "If you think about the critter too hard, he can smell your thinking and he gets all spooked up."

"Nothing to worry about," Sam Burch said. "If they know and are bunched up and waiting, it's just what we crave. If they ain't, we still give 'em something to think on."

Hale was grateful for Burch's apt contribution. Though it was only a repetition of his own words, he gained assurance, and so did the others, from hearing someone other than Hale sum it up.

The distant buttes were dark against a graying sky when the valley men came to the big white house and the outbuildings of the Eldorado outfit. Leaving a few to watch the horses, in a swale safe from flying lead, the others resumed the advance. Those who found no place in the rolling fortress, which was now pushed by manpower, fanned out, taking cover where they could find it.

The smell of frying bacon, and of burning mesquite roots came from the cook shack. The windmill creaked and clanked. Water splashed into the big circular basin. There were no lights in the house sheltered by tall cottonwoods; no sign of watchfulness until someone shouted, "Get out if you know what's good for you!"

The heavy barricade lumbered on. This wasn't the time for parley or shooting. Lem Weaver muttered, "Wind's right, and let the coal oil give them hell!"

The shout was repeated. What made Hale uneasy was that thus far there had not been any gunfire from the alert enemy. And now he could see detail among the trees, and the whiteness of their trunks.

"You, Hale! You don't want shooting."

Hale answered, "Maybe you don't. That's what we're here for."

"Change your mind. We got the schoolmarm here."

The barricade slowed up and stopped.

From the house, a woman called, "I'm no more scared than they are! Don't back down."

But the valley men, after their first groan of disappointment, cursed bitterly. Riddling the house with bullets and burning it down had lost all its flavor. Hale's heart sank to his boots. However willing the ranchers were to pull in their horns rather than jeopardize a woman, the fact that Jane all but wore his brand would put him in the position of having failed because of purely personal reasons. However much the valley men would deny having any such feeling, they'd still hold it against Hale that they'd bogged down because of his woman: and he'd not be able to lead them in any second attempt.

They grabbed her from school to make me pull in my horns, he said to himself, and knew that those beside him were matching his thoughts. They knew we'd hit this morning—something gave us away—something—someone—whichever it is, none of these fellows'll ever trust his neighbor again.

He raised his voice: "We can stay here as long as you can. We've got you outnumbered."

"But not outpointed!" came the mocking answer.

"Come out and see," Hale challenged. "We got water, and we can send for all the grub we need. If you think you can get anywhere keeping a woman to starve with you, you're crazy, Naylor. We don't have to shoot up the place. We'll pick you off when you have to hustle grub."

The men with him were regaining courage; Hale's burden seemed a bit lighter, yet he was in a sweat, for this chore had to be done the first attempt, however long it might take, or the valley was finished.

In the strengthening light, he saw a towel wig-wagging on a rifle barrel. That they wanted to parley heartened him.

"Come out, Naylor. I'll meet you half way."

SAM BURCH growled, "They want you, Joab. They'll shoot the gizzard outen you. Don't you go." And Weaver seconded him. . . . .

Hale retorted, "The shooting light's as good for us as for them. Keep your shirts on. Don't start a fracas. If they do nail me, the next move is yours. Make it good."

He stepped from cover. He took only his belt gun.

"Here I am, Naylor! Show your face."

Bart Naylor, neatly dressed as ever, loomed up in the thinning shadows. He moved easily, confidently, as though he had everything in the bag; and when they were within two yards of each other, he nodded and smiled pleasantly.

"If you didn't recognize the young lady's voice, I'll have her show herself. We don't want her to be hurt. We're not going to fire until you start it."

"Neat business." Hale was amazed that he was able to swallow his fury, and speak with such calmness. "But I told you we're here to stay. It's four to one, five to one, the whole valley is against you. We'll bottle you up while the rest of us play hob with every critter you've got. You'll be broke before we're done with you, and before you even run out of vittles. Is that clear?"

Naylor nodded gravely in acknowledgement of logic and fact. "You're not bluffing. Of course you're not. You're not that kind, and we know it. But here's our hole card. We knew what was coming—you fellows were busy too long—we have influence in the East, and we've used it. Troops from Fort Garvin are on the way."

"Troops! U. S. Army mixing in the cattle business?"

"No use snorting, Hale. This isn't cattle business any more. This isn't rustling, this isn't fence cutting, this isn't a shooting scrape between some of my men and some of yours. You've got a private army. You've intimidated the sheriff. You've upset local law." He chuckled good-naturedly. "Damn it, man, that's insurrection and the United States Army is as interested in settling that as it was when Geronimo was on the warpath. If you want to buck a squadron of cavalry, just sit here and you'll have your chance."

"Squadron! There's only a regiment in the whole territory."

"Listen, Hale. If only four troopers and a corporal show up, you're bucking the United States Army, and every man of you is a rebel and an outlaw. Now, get the hell out of here—or make camp and wait. We're not opening fire."

The valley men called, "Joab, he's got us on a limb and sawed it off." Others said, "That big son is bluffing!" But that his men were of two minds prodded Hale like a hot iron.

He said, "Naylor, you came for a white man's parley, and that is what you're getting." He unbuckled his belt, and let his gun drop to the ground. "Whether you're heeled or not, I don't know and don't care. But what I say won't be gun talk until we meet again and there's no truce."

"Say it, Hale. We're here to understand each other."

"You're a yellow-bellied son, hiding behind a woman's petticoats. You and your pack of murdering gunslicks, hiding behind a woman."

Naylor took it smilingly. "You're not wearing petticoats. Not you, Joab Hale! You want to take her place?"

"Don't you do it!" several cried from the barricade, before Hale could answer. "They'll finish you off; you got no chance!"

"I'm going!" Hale said, answering Naylor and the valley men at once. "The army isn't here. It may never be here. Call this coyote's bluff and camp here. And if you hear a shot fired, come piling in. You can bet it'll not make any difference to me. I won't be in any shape to worry about stray lead. If the army is on the way, Naylor don't need to blot me out, not now. If the army is not on the way he'd better not settle me. Okay, Naylor, turn Jane loose."

He stepped over his belt and gun.

Sam Burch came from behind the barricade. "Joab, I'm a-going with you."

"Stay back, you fool!"

"You're doing this account you figure you're responsible," the pop-eyed man persisted. "Mebbe you are, and if so, so'm I."

HE SHUCKED his gun, and went with Hale to the ranchhouse. When the three stepped to the veranda, Naylor said to those inside, "Let Miss Fraler leave. We have now two to take her place."

Then Hale and Jane faced each other at the threshold. Half a dozen gunhands lolled about the big living room, which

was off the vestibule. These men were tough.

"Joab, they've not handled me roughly. There's been nothing personal."

"This place would be a sieve if we smoked it up, and it'd burn like a grass fire."

"You've got too many enemies here, personal enemies, you and Sam. Oh, why did you have to do this! They wouldn't force me to stay where bullets would get me, but you—you'll be kept where the trouble is the hottest, and if your men do start shooting, they'll be put in the wrong, and no matter what happens these people will have a clean bill of health."

"Don't worry about me, honey. I left orders: one shot from this house, and they pour it home, all they got. So Sam and I are safe enough."

"Those were your orders?"

"Yes, and too late to change them."

"You mean that?"

"Do I look like I'm fooling?"

"Then I'm staying, Joab."

"You're which?"

"I'm staying. I'm not letting you buy my safety—I can't—you'd not be in this if I'd not driven you into it. I'm the last one on earth who has any right to be safe at your expense."

"You're free to leave, Miss Fraler," Bart Naylor reminded her.

"I'm not leaving! You heard me say why I wouldn't, and I mean it!" She caught Hale with both arms, clung to him and cried frantically, "I mean it! I won't leave! You can't make me!"

Sam Burch muttered, "Joab, she means it. We're stinkers if we leave her here, and we're idiots if we don't."

Hale was afraid to try breaking Jane's frenzied hold lest he injure the newly-healed burns; and even without such cause he'd still have been squeamish about using against her enough strength to get free of her grasp.

"I won't! I won't!" she repeated, so shrilly that the gunslicks gritted their teeth and shivered; her hysteria was getting under their skin.

Hale felt like a fool, with Jane crying and clinging to him as he dragged after Naylor. The manager of the Eldorado wanted her out of sight and hearing of his gunhands as quickly as possible, if only because some of them, however case-hardened, might be sufficiently moved by Jane's distress to feel that for once they were in the wrong. He'd seen enough of these ruffians who, with a skinful of whiskey and an earful of home and mother song screeched by a honkytonk girl would blubber like kids. No telling what some sentimental killer might do. Hale, sensing all this, whispered in her ear, "Honey, you calm down. Don't try anything crazy. You can't go more than so far with this weeping stuff."

He'd begun to suspect that she had a purpose in acting out of character, and he feared that she'd overdo it.

Naylor led them into the library, a sizable room, though much smaller than the sala in front. There was a fireplace, and leather upholstered furniture. The heads of buffalo and mountain sheep adorned the paneled wall. Along with these were tomahawks, bows and arrows, flintlock muskets, cavalry sabers, and a Sharp's saddle gun with a bore like a cannon. This was a dude's idea of how a ranch manager's private cozy corner should look: it had everything in it but a tepee or a hogan.

Jane began to swallow her sobs. She blinked, dabbled her eyes with Hale's bandanna, and stepped away from him. The two gunners watching at the window eyed her, shrugged, looked relieved at her shucking the hysterics, and turned back to their full routine of waiting for gunfire which probably would not come.

"Mr. Naylor," she said, after a final swallow and hiccup, "don't leave yet, I wish you and Joab and Sam could talk this over. I'm sure this is the first time you've ever met where you could talk. That's why I wouldn't leave—I wanted to persuade you to try to see each other eye to eye."

"Hale wasn't any too wordy the first time we met, ma'am."

"Nothing to talk about!" Hale snapped.

Jane sighed and turned her back on them. Sam Burch eyed the two and scratched his head. Finally Hale said, "Don't hear any bugles so far. They can scatter us once, but they can't ride herd on us, and neither can you."

"We've made fair offers," Naylor countered.

"Just because you've ruined your range,

over-grazing it till it's bad as if sheep'd worked it over, that's no reason we ought to be interested in your offers. If your critters are going headlong for a die-out, you might sell 'em to us, instead of rustling ours."

"I'd not be on the job long if I tried anything like that," Naylor answered. "You might as well forget this nonsense about war. This attempt is as good as flat now, and you won't ever be able to organize another. Come into the office!"

"What's the matter here?"

"Too much audience."

"Sam," Hale said over his shoulder, "you wait here with Jane."

HALFWAY down the passage, Naylor gestured to a door which was ajar. Before he could enter, Red Mike, chief of the gunslingers, called him and beckoned. Naylor said to Hale, "Go on in, I'll be with you in a minute," and went out to the front.

Hale stepped into a small room with desks and a bookkeeper's table and stool. There was a large steel safe, and cabinets of records. He was puzzled by Naylor's insistence on explaining and reasoning; clearly, and despite the Eldorado outfit's depending on the arrival of troops, Naylor was not sufficiently sure of himself to be without fear of future war. Then Hale began to suspect that he was being prepared for a man to man deal: immunity from raiding, provided he tended strictly to his own business.

He had lost little time pondering when the door opened, and a man stepped in, almost furtively; a tall, angular man with a lean, malicious face. The eyes were wrathful. He wore no guns. He stopped, poised like a cougar about to pounce. With a quick, two handed gesture, he drew a pair of bowie knives.

"You're what I've been looking for," he sad softly, "and this time you got no hideout gun."

Hale jerked back, shivering from the sight of glittering steel. He wasn't a knife fighter, and he had no use for anyone who did use a knife needlessly.

"You'll get a better chanct than you give my pardner," the man said, and flicked the knife.

The weapon stuck in the desk near Hale's hand. It vibrated from the force of the throw.

"Grab it and get to work."

The twisted grin, the eye-gleam, the voice all told Hale how useless it had been for him to tell his men to shoot up the ranch house if a shot were fired. He knew also that Jane would now be in no danger, for this duel in the office wouldn't ever alarm the valley men. His glance shifted to the door.

"Boss won't be back. Take it and get busy."

The avenger swayed a little. He presented his blade point on, for a thrust almost impossible to parry; he knew his business, and knew better than to risk up or down thrusts, which would give Hale a chance of snatching him by the wrist. Point on, he advanced daintily as a cat. It was like facing a dancing master, Hale told himself as he plucked the bowie from the desk and palmed the grip so that he too had his weapon point-on.

The man was no fool. Sure as he was of himself, he took no risk of being clipped by beginner's luck while lunging home. He feinted: the darting steel made Hale jerk and parry wildly.

The enemy nodded. He'd learned how Hale responded. He made another feint, and learned more. Hale retreated, but reached out as he did so—straight armed, to block the rush he expected. He brought up sharply against the desk. The knife man swerved as if to catch him from the flank, before he could shift his guard.

Hale palmed an ink well with his left hand as he pivoted. This was the one thing which the enemy had not planned. The solid missile, though missing the man's face, splashed him with ink. Momentarily blinded, he cursed in fury.

Hale's lunge got him inside the man's guard. The body to body clash ended with both tripping on a spittoon and crashing to the floor. The impact knocked the knife specialist breathless. Hale, making the most of the chance, set to work on the now unprotected arm and wrist. The other whipped about but could not regain his advantage. And now, unarmed, Hale had his hands full of what he dared not let go: nor could he disable his man enough to settle the struggle.

Far off, a bugle sounded.

Hale heard, and felt useless. The enemy snarled triumphantly; taking advantage of Hale's momentary weakness, he wrenched his arm free, and panted, "Get your knife, I said I'd—"

A shot rumbled; a shot inside the house. The blast shook the window sash. A man yelled, "Now they'll pour it to us! Watch it, Mike!"

It was Sam Burch; Sam Burch, dismayed and terrified that a shot had broken the truce. But even then, Hale did not get the full significance of it all until Burch cursed Jane, and she screamed.

"Hope they blow your gizzard out!" Burch was screeching. "Hope you're the first one hit!"

A DOZEN rifles whacked from the front. Springfields and buffalo guns, Henrys and Winchesters, they crackled, they roared, they boomed and they popped from the right, the left, the rear of the ranchhouse. Glass shattered, and splinters flew. Men scrambled to their firing posts.

Hale was the first to recover from the shock. He booted his man, laid him out cold. Then he ducked as a volley swept the sash from the office window.

On his knees, he yanked out desk drawers and opened cabinets. He found a snub-nosed .38, which he scooped up with the loose cartridges which had spilled out with it. While he hadn't counted on any such luck, he was hardly surprised by it, since a good many bookkeepers and paymasters kept a weapon at hand, just in case.

Judging from the yelling and the thunder of rifles from the front, the rolling barricade was worrying the defenders. There was hardly any shooting from the sides: all hands seemed for the moment to be concentrating on blasting the marching fortress before it could get too close.

Jane, hearing the bugle, must have gone loco and yanked the trigger of one of the muzzle loaders hanging on the study wall, Hale told himself. And Sam Burch, shocked out of his wits, had betrayed himself by crying a warning to Naylor's men.

Burch, zealous Burch, was then the traitor in camp. Burch, Hale now knew, had "gallantly" accompanied him to be a witness to prove, later on, that he, Hale, had not been murdered, but had flared up, starting a free for all. Whatever lies would tend to keep Eldorado in the right, Burch was to have been the man to put them across.

Then, as the tension of having so narrowly missed death at the hands of a knife fighter left Hale, he began to appreciate Jane's peril. He groaned, cursed himself for having wasted time even to hunt a gun. Now that the shooting had started, she was fair game. Burch could finish her and blame it on a stray bullet. Burch, having been shocked into betraying himself, had to protect himself.

Hale started for the passageway.

The door kicked open. Before the man in the passageway had actually crossed the threshold, he cried, "Get him, Slim?"

Hale cut loose with the double-action .38 before he had even a fair view of his target. The man who lurched headlong into the office, dropping without even having drawn his Peacemaker, was Sam Burch. That he now wore a belt and gun was final evidence of his treachery.

Hale snatched the weapon and crouched over the wounded man, and watched him coughing blood, watched him wallow in an ever widening pool of blood.

"Where is she?" Hale demanded. "Sound off, or I'll whip your brains out!"

"She—she—uh—"

He choked, rolled and lay kicking and twitching.

Hale hurdled the dying man. The defenders were now so busy with what faced them that not a man would have any time to be looking behind him. The air was choking with powdersmoke; it reeked with sweat of rage and fright; it was heavy with the fume of spilled blood. Hale darted for the study. No use crouching now. The woodwork blossomed with splinters head high, waist high, shoulder high. You took your chances wherever or however you went.

A man lay rolling and groaning on the floor. Two cursed as they lay with cheeks against Winchesters. Hale shouted above the blaze and crackle, "Come and get it!"

They jerked about with their carbines. Hale fired. A .30-30 hacked, and his Peacemaker jumped again. It was only then that he realized that the first man to face him had scored with a grazing slug.

"Jane! Jane, honey, come out!"

"I'm all right," she answered, dazedly. "Just knocked dizzy."

Blood smeared her face. She had a soggy red handkerchief in her hand. He began moving furniture to make a barricade for her.

"Get them rifles!" he shouted. "You stay down whilst I grab them from behind."

"You stay here, you fool!" she cried. "You can't tackle them all the way you did these!"

Then he caught the smell of kerosene. "They went and done it! She's a-blazing!"

Hale drew the loaded sixguns from the holsters of those who lay on the floor. Jane snatched one from him.

"Stay back!" he yelled, and dashed to the hall. "Keep down."

GUNS dancing, he hammered the enemy as they retreated from the flames. Smoke and gusts of hot air made it impossible for anyone to recognize another until they came face to face: and Hale had no need to wait for recognition before shooting.

Then, of a sudden, the insane banging guns stopped. Hale staggered back from the doorway of the study. Jane was wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Before bewilderment at the silence could find words, they heard Bart Naylor shouting, "We'll drop our guns and come out with our hands up."

"Where's Hale? Where's Jane and Sam?" Lem Weaver yelled above the roar and bluster of flames which the wind whipped to growing ferocity. "Send 'em out or you're finished."

Hale called, "Tell 'em we're on the way. And you're a ringtail fool for luck, Naylor!"

Pistols leveled, Hale backed down the passageway after Jane. Eldorado gunners, scorched and grimy, followed him. And when he came into the open, Hale saw that bunkhouse and barns and storehouses and granaries were ablaze.

"Where's Sam?" Lem Weaver demanded.

"Where the coyote belongs," Hale gasped. "Back in there, where I shot the hell out of him. He was selling us out to Naylor. Where's the cavalry—I heard bugles."

Weaver grinned. "Quite a far piece away. Lanky Harris said, keep your shirts on, that there bugle music jest means, come and get your chow. No use leaving till we heard Boots and Saddles, or Charge, or something. Who in tunket fired that shot inside? We knowed for sure you was killed. Jane, them polecats try to murder you and missed?"

Without any real necessity, since Jane clung to him as tightly as he'd ever imagined possible, Hale supported the bedraggled school marm, and spoke for her: "She yanked the trigger of a blunderbuss or something Naylor had on the wall for an ornament. Dang little idiot heard the bugles and figured if a shot'd start you all blazing away, you might win afore the army could stop it."

"Jane," said Weaver, "that there was the most outright loco trick I ever heard of. You ain't got sense enough to teach anyone how much is two and two. You got no more sense than a drunken squaw. Joab, if you ever let that gal away from you, you're even stupider."

"I'm so dumb, Lem," Jane said, "that I'm resigning when the term is up. And Joab and I are going prospecting to make us a stake. Aren't we, Joab?"

"We are not, honey. We're sticking with the valley folks. Before the show started, me and Bart Naylor started having a heart to heart talk. I more than half way feel he didn't aim to have me knifed. I think it was private spite work, and one of his men rigged it up without him suspecting it. But we'd begun to talk about us buying some of his critters until his range can build up again—that is, after we got back those he stole."

"Suppose the army's on the road, making for here?" Jane asked.

"Hope it is," Hale answered. "If the officers commanding the outfit get a look at you, it'll sure turn them against Naylor's outfit, and it'll get to the governor."

He scooped Jane tenderly up in his arms.

"One of you gents mind getting me my hoss and holding him whilst I mount up? I got both hands full right now, and I aim to keep 'em that-away for a spell."

THE END

WHEN CARSON GREW WILD

By

BURL TUTTLE

CARSON CITY stands in a class by itself among the Nevada communities as a city that came into existence without any cause or reason beyond the arbitrary determination of a single individual. At the time of its origin its site was the center of neither mining, transportation or argicultural activities; in fact, it was the center of nothing aside from Abe Curry's reputed ambition to hit Genoa a damaging wallop. Had a Genoa promotor not attempted to hold up Abe in a property deal, there seems every likelihood that today Genoa might have been the capital of Nevada. Abe Curry would have seen to that had he lived there.

By 1859, Carson City had become a fact. Hotels, saloons, stores, a brewery and other places of business sprang up as fast as they could be built. Wells Fargo established an express office through which letters could be sent to California for twenty-five cents. Then the Placerville, Humboldt and Salt Lake City Telegraph Company completed their lines from California to Carson City on August 13, 1859, making it one of the few cities in the west with such service. In November of the same year the Territorial *Enterprise,* a newspaper still in its swaddling clothes, moved from Genoa to Carson.

With the discovery of Gold Hill, Carson no longer lacked an excuse for existence. It jumped into the limelight as a freight and trading center. By the spring of 1860 Carson was the acknowledged business center of western Utah. In July of the same year Governor James W. Nye arrived and set up the machinery for a territorial government. Not having enough money to rent a building to be used as a capital, nor knowing any property owner willing to extend credit, the new governor was faced with a major problem. Abe Curry, as usual, swung into action and offered Nye, rent-free, a stone building at Warm Springs, the present site of the

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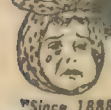

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state prison. Nye's Secretary of State at the time was Orion Clemens, brother of Mark Twain.

Carson City grew with leaps and bounds during the early days. Brassy sunlight and dust clung to Carson's street, the main thoroughfare running in a double rank of frame and stone structures, with the mountain range bulking hugely hardly a quarter of a mile away. Ore wagons, spring carts and freighters jumbled the streets. An endless bedlam of voices hailed the townsmen or cursed balky mules, all bound for the diggings at Virginia City and Gold Hill.

Carson lived up to its toughness as one of the hell camps of the west. Fights were frequent and killings numerous. The town had its "line," too, populated with six hundred honkytonk women at one time. Its famous Chinatown today has fallen apart. Long deserted, the section is only an ugly mass of lopsided old buildings, the roofs blown off some of them, doors down, windows out, the street filled with bushes and weeds—a lone and ghostly place that once housed an estimated two thousand Chinese.

Hard times along the Comstock in 1863 and 1864 set back Carson's development materially. Unemployment and depression in Virginia City and Gold Hill reflected on the capital city, and many of its people joined the exodus to California or back east. Carson City never fully recovered. However, it was given a material boost early in 1865 when Congress authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to accept from Mr. and Mrs. Moses Job and James Riddle a lot on which the branch mint was later constructed.

CARSON pottered along until 1869 when it was given an infusion of new blood by the start of the construction of Virginia and Truckee Railroad. The first spike was driven at Carson City, September 28th, and the first train went into Gold Hill, November 12, 1869, and into Virginia City, January 29, 1870. Carson City had become a railroad center.

With new strikes on the Comstock, Gold Hill and Silver City, Carson City got his share of the influx: freighters, gun-

men, gamblers, lawyers, doctors, gandy-dancers, miners—and birds of paradise walking the streets in clothes and jewelry that shamed the wooden Indians in front of the tobacco shops. Carson Street—honkytonks, street-walkers lurking in the shadows—shabby, rundown. The Greek place where you could get a good meal. The saloon where you could get a big glass of local beer and all the free lunch you could eat to go with it. It was a lusty, brawling, fun-loving town.

A woman visitor, who later described Carson City in a letter, said, "The streets and gutters abound with every article of cast off abomination to be found in a well stocked junk yard; and to make matters worse, they are in all stages of decomposition. According to the Darwinian theory, the next generation will be born with turned-up noses."

September, 1875, brought in a series of incendiary fires that ended on the night of December 18th, when Tom Burt, a hanger-on at the Curry Engine House, was seized and hanged on a cross-arm of the cemetery gate.

Another disastrous fire, July 5, 1885, burned the old theater, French Hotel, Adams House and numerous stores and other places of business.

Carson City reached the tip of its career in the eighties, when the U.S. census gave it a population of 4,229, a figure that was destined to decline, slowly at first and then in a dizzy plunge, until 1930 when the official figure was set at 1,596. However, it has been climbing since due to its generous divorce, gambling and no tax laws.

But gone are the days when the color of life was red. Nail by nail, brick by brick, the historic hell-roaring camps of Nevada are crumbling, falling, and carried away in auto trunks or by souvenir collectors. Carson City is no exception.

Carson City's chief claim to fame today is the fact it is the smallest state capital in the United States. With the exception of its imposing capital and other buildings housing state, county and city governments, the town looks the same. It's a town where you can get married overnight, gamble over the weekend, and get a divorce over a summer's vacation.

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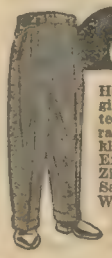

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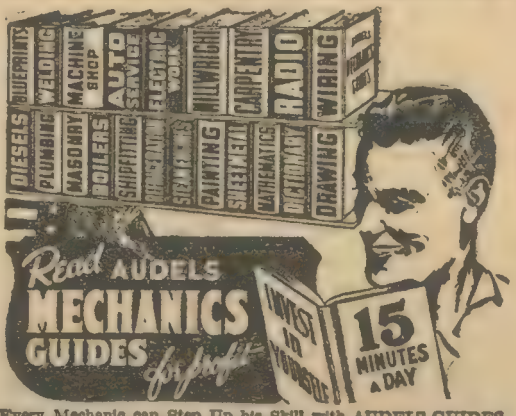

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ANGEL'S COURT

By JOHN T. LYNCH

BY THE time the comparatively few decent citizens of Los Angeles decided it was necessary to form a vigilance committee, in 1851, it was too late. For, as a result of the active and business-like committees already formed in almost every other town on the Pacific Coast, the hardcases were pouring into the little adobe village in droves.

Since most of the new arrivals were well laden with stolen gold, and a large portion of the local citizenry consisted of saloon keepers and gambling house operators, these human dregs from other places were made welcome. The few honest merchants watched the mounting number of daily killings, murderous saloon brawls and frequent gun fights with helpless dismay. They did, however, form a citizens' justice committee and kept trying, against great odds, to establish a semblance of law. They built a one-story adobe building and called it a Court House. An election was held. The result was no surprise to anybody; the criminal element gleefully elected their own men to serve as judge, city marshal and sheriff.

Under the circumstances the new courthouse merely became a big and highly entertaining showhouse. The populace jammed the court room at every trial knowing they would be furnished with hilarious entertainment. Arrests were made, and cases heard, not for the sake of justice, but for laugh values. The celebrated case of Juan Largo vs. John Chapo is typical. . . .

John Chapo, a town bum and moocher, surprised the citizens one morning when he came riding up the main street on an old, ewe-necked, flat-footed mustang. Everybody knew that Chapo never owned a horse—even such a sorry creature as this one—so Chapo was laughingly arrested.

Juan Largo, a wealthy rancher, claimed the horse belonged to him. Although the sad and sway-backed nag was worth less than seven dollars, and Largo had thou-

sands, he was a stickler for principle—as he called it. Chapo, of course, insisted that he had owned the horse for a long time.

The question before the court, then, was just who owned the sagging equine. Largo and Chapo both, through their comic lawyers, claimed that they had placed their brand on the creature. The old horse had at one time or another belonged to almost every rancher in the district, and he was almost completely covered with brands.

"Your Honor," said Chapo's lawyer, "I suggest that we send to Santa Barbara for Will Gibbs, the great expert on brands."

"I object!" Largo's attorney cut in.

At this point the horse, tied just outside the courtroom window, started to bray like a mule. Largo's lawyer raised his voice to be heard over the persistent braying. The horse brayed louder.

"Hold it a minute," the judge said. "Let's hear just one of the lawyers talk at a time!"

The spectators cheered and howled in glee at his Honor's great joke. The judge took a bow, then ordered the horse taken out of ear-shot of the court, and kept there. He then ordered a recess until Will Gibbs arrived.

Because the judge would not permit the horse to be brought near the court again, a large sheet of tracing paper had been spread over the horse's hide, and all of the markings traced. It was this huge sheet that was handed the great brand expert, Will Gibbs, to examine when he arrived. Gibbs, who had hurried right from the stage depot to the court, which was already in session, had no idea of what the trial was about. He was merely called to the witness stand and handed the tracing paper. He studied it for awhile, as the spectators waited in silence for his expert opinion. Finally he looked up at the judge, cleared his throat importantly, and said, "Judge, that's a damned good map of Sonora."

Gibbs was promptly dismissed. Then the judge said, "Chapo, I've decided that you win the case. Wasn't this the fairest trial you ever got?"

Chapo grinned. "I don't know," he answered. "You see, this is the first time I ever stole a horse—from Largo."

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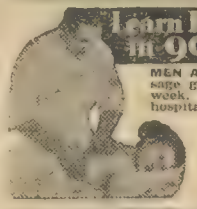

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(Continued from page 26)

kiss. And he gripped old Pablo's hand.

"You remember the little prayer I teach you, Warren?" asked Rosa.

"I remembered the little prayer, Rosa. I said it while I walked up Whiskey Street with my father to kill or to be killed. I will say that prayer today, with you. The day of my wedding. My father's wedding. It's a good prayer, Rosa. It was answered the day when my father and I were not killed. . . . It is a good prayer, Rosa. . . ."

"Is a good prayer, Warren . . . said by a good man. The Señor Dios has touched you and yours. Amen." Rosa crossed herself.

Thus was Dad Claggett's double wedding at Trail City blessed. . . .

THE END

(Continued from page 49)

and vicious fear those who represent the law.

This was the highest compliment he could be paid. For now Clayton and those like him knew that he no longer wore a badge, and so they thought they might spring to power again. They had been afraid, and decent people had known of their fear; and now they thought to rise again.

He lifted his eyes to Sheriff Barry Cathcart, and he liked what he saw. The sheriff was young, yet he knew all the tricks Conally had taught him. He would not back, and he would fight as Tim had fought. He, in a sense, was a young Tim Conally.

And so Conally laughed. He folded the note as though it were something precious. He tucked it into his pocket and swung toward the door.

"Let them have their joke, Barry," he said to the sheriff. "Let them laugh now, for I'm afraid they'll choke on their laughter later."

He went through the door, remembering the incredulity on the sheriff's face. He tugged reins free of the rack and swung to the saddle. For a long moment he sat and stared about the town. Then he turned Blinky and started away.

It was a glorious day, and he felt fine, and after a bit he let the horse run.

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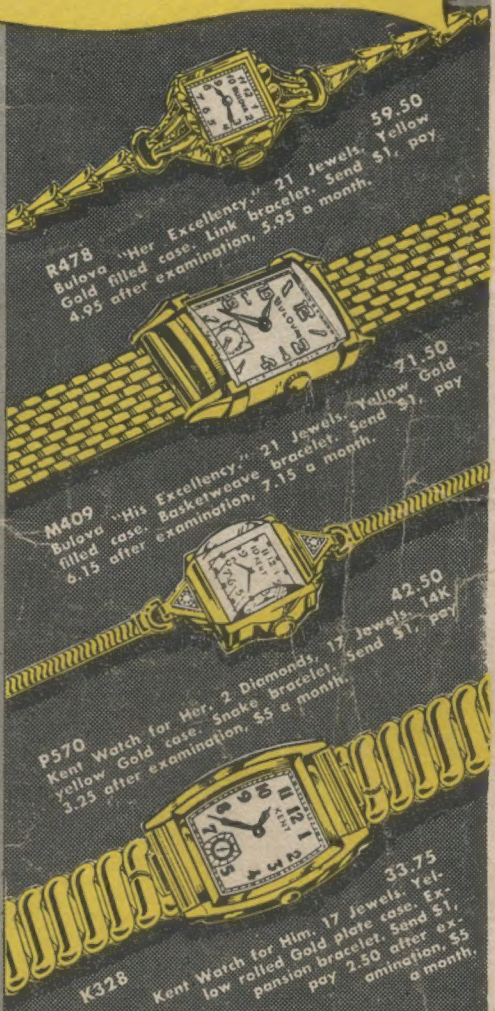

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